

FACT SHEET:



ABIOS

Acquired Brain Injury Outreach Service

Category:
Behaviour
Communication

Audience:
Family and
Support Workers;
and Professionals

For more information
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Emotional Recognition after Brain Injury



Why do emotions change?

The ability to recognise and respond to others emotions is vital for our ability to form and maintain successful relationships with other people. Much of communication is non-verbal, for example interpretation of facial or body cues, or through our tone of voice. Sometimes after a brain injury the ability to identify emotions from faces and other verbal cues can be impaired, and this can lead to negative interpersonal communications.

Ability to recognise and understand emotions in oneself after a severe brain injury can also change. This may make it difficult for the person with brain injury to identify and label their own emotions, and to express these emotions effectively with other people. Inability to express emotions and inability to read the emotions in others will sometimes lead to distant or conflicted relationships and lack of understanding.

Social and interpersonal communication is an important process that requires attention, working memory, information processing, and executive functioning abilities (decision-making, problem solving, behavioural monitoring, inhibition and activation) and so it not surprising that people with brain injury sometimes have difficulty with social communication, including ability to process, understand and communicate about emotions.

Signs of difficulty understanding and recognising emotions

There are many different signs that a person may be having more difficulty with understanding and recognising emotions after a brain injury. These can include the person:

- Seeming unaffected or unmoved by life events
- Having behaviour that is not appropriate to the situation e.g. laughing in a sad situation, or not responding to others emotions
- Seeming confused or not aware of emotions in other people

- Not asking about other peoples' emotions
- Unable to put the cues together e.g. not recognising from facial expression, tone or content that someone is sad or angry
- Misreading or misinterpreting the cues about how someone feels
- Not showing emotions or "blunted" emotional response, or:
- Others find that the person with brain injury is harder to "read" emotionally

Empathy and emotional awareness

Empathy refers to the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. If a person has limited awareness of emotions in other people, they may seem egotistical or self-focussed and lacking in sensitivity. Empathy is important as it allows the person to respond appropriately to emotions in others. Lack of empathy can quickly lead to the other person feeling that their emotional needs are not recognised or responded to, or that the person is not interested and this can damage the quality of the relationship.

Supporting relationships with family and others

If the person with brain injury is not recognising or responding to the emotions of other people in their lives, it's important to support the relationship. This could include prompting;

- the person with brain injury to show interest and to ask about others' emotions/feelings, even in a routine way
- the person with brain injury to express their own emotions to other people more directly, and
- others to be more clear and direct in their emotions to unsure the person with brain injury is understanding.

Self-awareness of emotions

Encourage the person to be aware of and understand their own emotions and reactions. This may be difficult early on in recovery when emotions are strong and changeable.

- For people with limited verbal skills and communication – symbols, words, or

pictures to represent different emotions can be helpful in expressing emotions and choices.

- Even a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" can start the conversation.
- It may be hard to hear about some of the more challenging emotions like angry, frustration, grief, despair, guilt, but all of these emotions can be very normal after a brain injury.
- Ask how the person is feeling, and why they are feeling a certain way. It ok for people to have a "bad day", even when you/they are striving to be positive and forward thinking

Recognising emotions in other people

Sometimes the person with brain injury may be confused about emotions in others, and not be skilled in correctly identifying and responding to emotions expressed by others. Some ways to help could include:

- Directing the person's attention to visual cues that correspond to certain emotions – key visual facial indicators to direct the person can include the eyes, eyebrows, and the mouth.
- Tone of voice can also give clues about emotions
- Help the person understand other peoples' emotions:
 - ◊ "He sounds very unhappy/frustrated/angry" or "He looks very angry around the eyes, what do you think?" or "What do you think is going on with that person?" (Directing attention to emotions; labelling emotions)
 - ◊ "She is smiling a lot, she must be really happy..." (Labelling emotions - smiling = happy)
 - ◊ "He sounds/looks really upset – what do you think he might be upset about" (Information seeking & directing attention to key facial cues or tone of voice)
 - ◊ "How would you feel about that/if that happened?" (Open ended question, and drawing on the person's previous experiences)
 - ◊ "Do you think they look angry or sad?" (Clarifying emotions)

Practicing – practical ideas and tips

Some research suggests that practicing identifying and labelling emotions improves the person’s awareness of emotions in others.

- Using pictures out of magazines, or clips from movies or television shows can be a good way to practice awareness of others emotions.
- Checking in from time to time about the persons own emotions/feelings is a useful reminder that emotions are important, and talking about emotions can be helpful in relationships.
- Emotion focused psychological counselling or therapy (EFT) may also enhance the person’s ability to understand, recognize and express emotions in relationships with others.

References

Neumann, D., Babbage, D.R., Zupan, B., & Willer, B. (2015) A Randomized Controlled Trial of Emotion Recognition Training After Traumatic Brain Injury. Journal of Head Trauma Rehabilitation, 30(3), E12-E23.

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Resources

See other Acquired Brain Injury Outreach Service (ABIOS) Information sheets at

<http://www.health.qld.gov.au/abios/>

Notes:

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