

FACT SHEET:

Category:
Support for families

Audience:
Family and
Support Workers

For more information
contact the Acquired Brain
Injury Outreach Service
(ABIOS)

PH: (07) 3176 9506

Email: abios@health.qld.gov.au

Address: PO Box 6053, Buranda 4102

©The State of Queensland
(Queensland Health) 2021

Reviewed March 2021

For review March 2022
ABIOS Social Worker



ABIOS

Acquired Brain Injury Outreach Service

My Friend or Extended Family Member has an ABI

Introduction

Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) tends to have an effect on everyone that is close to the injured person. This includes extended family and friends. Friends and extended family can provide much needed support, both practical and emotional, for the injured person and their immediate family. At the same time, friends and extended family may also experience a variety of emotions and changes in relationships with the person with the ABI and their family.



Possible Reactions

Extended family and friends may experience a range of emotions similar to those experienced by direct family members. These reactions are common in the processes of coming to terms with all the changes that occur when a close friend has sustained a brain injury. Some of the emotions could include:

- Shock and denial – finding it hard to accept the reality of a significant injury and its impact on a person.
- Anger and frustration – at the changes it has caused to relationships, at the recovery process and wanting to blame someone.
- Loss – of a friendship, of your old relationship and feeling sad for the losses experienced by the person with the ABI.
- Resentment – resenting changes to relationships, the health care system and the actions of others.
- Guilt – regarding the injury “why them, why not me?”, regarding your involvement “I should have done more to help the person / the family”, or feeling that you should be doing something to make the situation better.
- Loneliness and isolation – feeling the loss of a friend and/or feeling that other people in your life don’t understand the impact that the injury is having on you and others.
- Mourning and Chronic Sorrow - mourning can begin again when you are reminded of what has been lost. Your friend is still with you and although you are learning to relate to them as a different person you periodically remember important facets of them that have been lost.

Relationship and Role Changes

Relationships with the injured friend/family member as well as with their immediate family may change. Some of these changes might be:

- Friends/extended family may become more involved with the injured person's family than previously.
- New relationships form with people you may not have been close to before the injury.
- A change in focus as everyone is concentrating on what is happening with the injured person.
- Withdrawing from the relationship.
- Increasing contact in the relationship.

Brain injury is long-term and generally indicates a life change for the family unit.

For the friend or extended family member, this may mean:

- Providing supervision and support to the person with the ABI.
- Taking on a different role with members of the family, e.g. having a greater role with the children and the partner than previously.
- Providing an outlet for normal social contact for the person with the ABI and their family.
- Assisting to educate others about the injury and what this means.

Practical Consequences of ABI

Everyone will require time to come to terms with the changes that occur following a loved one's ABI, especially as the changes are often long-term. People will react in different ways with some readily seeking assistance while others may be reluctant to accept help. There is no set time line for people to adjust.

It is important to be sensitive and be guided by what the family say they need. Usually you will need to ask how you can help, however, practical assistance is usually welcome initially and for the long term, families appreciate ongoing supportive contact and friendships or relationships to remain. Common ways to help could be:

- Assisting with the caring for others in the home e.g. children, while others are helping the person with the ABI.
- Assisting with meal preparation and routine household management tasks.
- Providing respite and time out for the carers.
- Assisting with managing practical matters such as finances and decision making where needed.
- Assisting with finding other sources of help.
- Providing social support e.g. planning and supporting social and recreational outings.

Useful Strategies

- Ask the family to be honest regarding information and their needs, but be sensitive to their pain and emotional situation. Respect their timing in being able to do this.
- Become involved in the hospitalisation and rehabilitation stages as appropriate, but be aware the family may need 'space'.
- Learn about brain injury so you understand the effects.
- Be available to help where required with practical tasks such as transport, respite, shopping and child minding.
- Allow time to deal with the injury. Each person will have different ways of coping.
- Be open to participation in support groups or counselling.
- Be aware that emotions can 'run high' in times of stress and be patient and forgiving



