



Supporting a friend

Information sheet: supporting a friend or family member with a special person who has sustained an acquired brain injury

Understanding Acquired Brain Injury

Acquired brain injury (ABI) refers to any injury to the brain that occurs after birth, including strokes, traumatic injuries, infections, or tumours. This can significantly impact not only the individual but also their family and friends. ABI can affect cognition, emotions, behaviour, and physical abilities, resulting in a range of challenges for the injured person and their loved ones.

What your friend may be experiencing?

Emotional Strain: Your friend may experience feelings of grief, anger, confusion, and helplessness as they cope with the changes in their special person.

Increased Responsibilities: They may take on additional caregiving roles, leading to physical and emotional exhaustion.

Changes in Family Dynamics: The ABI may alter the family structure and relationships, requiring adjustments in how family members interact and support each other.

Social Isolation: Your friend may feel isolated due to the demands of caregiving, which can limit their social interactions.

How can you support your friend?

Be There: Sometimes, just being present is enough. Offer to listen without judgment. Allow your friend to express their feelings and concerns openly. Ask how you can help.

Educate Yourself: Learn about ABI and its effects to better understand what your friend is going through. This knowledge can help you offer informed support.

Offer Practical Help: Assist with day-to-day tasks such as cooking, cleaning, or running errands. Small acts of kindness can significantly alleviate their burden.

Encourage Self-Care: Remind your friend to take time for themselves. Encourage activities that help them relax and recharge, whether it's taking a walk, reading a book, or enjoying a hobby.

Stay Connected: Invite them to social gatherings or simply check in regularly via calls or messages. Maintaining a connection can help combat feelings of isolation.

Suggest Professional Help: If your friend seems overwhelmed, gently suggest they seek support from a therapist or a support group for caregivers. Professional guidance can be invaluable during this challenging time.

Be Patient: Understand that your friend's emotional state may fluctuate. They may have good days and bad days, and it's essential to be patient and supportive throughout.



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What not to say?

Avoid phrases that may unintentionally minimise their experience, create feelings of isolation, or overlook their challenges. Here are some examples of what not to say:

“I know how you feel”

Even if you've faced similar situations, every experience with brain injury is unique, and this can come across as dismissive. Instead, show empathy by listening and acknowledging their emotions without assuming you understand exactly what they're going through.

“At least they're alive”

While well-intentioned, this can minimise the struggles of adjusting to a new reality. Families of brain injury survivors often grieve the loss of the person their loved one used to be and need space to process these complex emotions.

“Things will get back to normal soon”

Recovery from brain injury can be slow, with lasting changes in personality, behavior, or abilities. Giving false hope or expectations about a “return to normal” can increase feelings of frustration and disappointment.

“Everything happens for a reason”

This type of platitude can feel invalidating, as it doesn't acknowledge the real pain and challenges involved. Instead, consider offering genuine support without trying to find a “reason” behind the hardship.

“At least it's not worse”

Comparisons to other potential outcomes, such as worse injuries, can feel dismissive. Acknowledging the family's current struggle and pain is often more supportive.

“Let me know if you need anything”

Though well-meaning, this puts the onus on the family to ask for help, which can feel burdensome. Instead, offer specific help, like bringing meals, helping with errands, or offering childcare, so they don't have to worry about asking for assistance.

“You're so strong – you'll get through this”

While meant to be encouraging, this can imply that they should always stay strong and cope well. Brain injury recovery often includes times of vulnerability, and it's okay to acknowledge and validate those moments too.

It's helpful to be mindful and patient, as everyone processes the changes and challenges differently. Empathising, actively listening, and offering concrete support can mean a lot to someone navigating life after a loved one's brain injury.

Conclusion

Supporting a friend through the challenges of a loved one's ABI can be incredibly rewarding yet demanding. Your compassion and understanding can make a significant difference in their journey. Remember, being a supportive friend means offering your presence, understanding, and practical help as they navigate this difficult time.