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# Behavioural and Psychosocial Changes

A brain injury often affects a person's social and behavioural responses. These changes can show up in areas related to self-care skills, cognition (thinking), and interpersonal skills. These changes can be the hardest ones for family caregivers. The majority of acquired brain injuries result in some kind of behavioural change. It is important to remember that problem behaviour is often because of a person's brain injury and the resulting frustration and anger that the survivor feels.



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## COMMON BEHAVIOURAL EFFECTS

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### Irritability

Many survivors feel more irritable and have less patience. This may relate to feelings of frustration because of difficulties in doing things that he or she was able to do before the injury.

#### Examples of problems with irritability:

- nothing pleases the survivor; he or she complains about everything
- friends find the survivor difficult to get along with
- quick to react negatively to loud music or children playing, getting worse when fatigued

#### Tips for minimizing the effects of irritability:

- Establishing a daily routine so the survivor may feel more secure and in control in his or her environment can help.

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### Impulsivity/Lack of Self-Control

An individual with a brain injury may be acting on impulse or acting without thinking. He or she might say the wrong thing, drive a car when told several times not to do so, or engage in unsafe work behaviour even when warned about his or her limitations. Impulsivity is hard to deal with because it applies to so many situations.

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### Frustration and Anger

After a brain injury, many people become frustrated more easily than before. The survivor may not be able to do things as easily as previous to the injury. Sometimes he or she may not know what others expect. This can be frustrating. Most survivors have the tendency to get angry and lash out easily.

#### Examples of frustration and anger difficulties:

- wants to get up and leave the doctor's office after waiting short time
- fires case worker for not returning call the same day

#### Tips for minimizing frustration and anger:

- As a caregiver, come to terms with the fact that you are interacting with a person who has little patience.
- Remind the survivor that there are steps necessary to achieve what he or she wants to have happen.

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### Foul Language and Outbursts

It is common for brain injury survivors to use foul language or rude body language. This can sometimes be very embarrassing in social situations. At times, outbursts can be physical rather than verbal.

#### Examples of a foul language/outburst difficulties:

- survivor rarely swore before injury, but now happens daily
- has begun to get physically abusive
- young survivor threatens to kill his or her teacher

#### Tips for minimizing foul language and outbursts:

- Anticipate the events that might trigger the survivor in this way and try to avoid them
- Point out the tone and kind of language the survivor is using.
- Explain this change in behaviour to family and friends.
- Don't let the behaviour escalate to abuse. Know when to ask for professional help.

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## Lack of Self-Awareness

Self-awareness means understanding one's own strengths and weaknesses. It is very common for a person who has survived a brain injury to lack insight into what tasks they can do. The survivor may even be unaware that he or she has any deficits as a result of the brain injury.

### Tips for minimizing effects of lack of self-awareness:

- Build self-esteem by encouraging the person to try a non-dangerous activity that he or she feels confident doing.
- Use visual or verbal reminders to improve confidence.
- Give realistic and supportive feedback.

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## Less Effective Social Skills

A survivor of a brain injury may not behave appropriately. He or she may have lost social skills. This can make it hard to fit in, get along with others, and read and understand people and situations.

### Examples of less effective social skills:

- interrupting conversation with something unrelated to topic
- revealing personal details about self or others to staff or strangers
- having an outburst if can't do a task or get own way

### Tips for minimizing the effects of less effective social skills

- React calmly.
- Role-play (practice) responses to social situations.
- Use redirection (get the survivor interested in something else going on).
- Praise and encourage appropriate behaviour.

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## Repetitive Behaviours (Perseveration)

Perseveration means getting stuck on one idea or one behaviour and repeating it over and over again.

### Examples of perseveration:

- talks constantly about daughter's terrible husband
- speaks daily of getting driver's licence renewed
- writes several letters to social worker complaining about not being helpful

### Tips for minimizing perseveration:

- Use redirection (get the survivor interested in something else going on).
- Engage the survivor in a physical task if verbally "stuck" on a topic.
- Be firm and refuse to discuss the topic anymore.

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## Sexuality

Many people who have survived brain injury experience cognitive and psychological changes that can cause problems with sexual relations. Problems can include impulsivity, loss of sexual interest, sexual hyperactivity, and sexual dysfunction. In most cases, brain injury can also produce heightened sexual drive, which can disinhibit the survivor and make him or her more demanding when it comes to sex.

### Examples of difficulties in the area of sexuality:

- takes every opportunity to grab or touch other people
- takes a very assertive approach to sexual relations that tends to scare people off
- talks constantly about wanting a spouse

### Tips for minimizing difficulties in the area of sexuality:

- Repeat often that the behaviour is inappropriate.
- Warn those in the brain injury survivor's company to stay at arm's length so they are not vulnerable.
- Engage a trained professional to provide the survivor with a way to express sexual feelings and frustration.

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## COMMON PSYCHOSOCIAL EFFECTS

### Depression

Some healthcare providers view signs of depression as part of a survivor's progress. Often, it means the person has come to realize his or her disability and difficulties. The person may begin to grieve in a way that is similar to when a friend or family member has died. This grief follows the familiar progression of feelings including denial, anger, depression, and acceptance. At first the survivor may not recognize the loss. Once he or she does recognize it, anger and frustration usually follow. Depression can set in after this stage.

#### Signs of depression:

- low activity level
- sleep problems
- difficulty controlling emotions
- lack of initiation

It may be helpful for families to recognize the symptoms and provide support and reassurances. In cases where depression interferes with rehabilitation, medication can help.

It is important to know that there are gender differences in the symptoms of depression as well as the ways of coping with the symptoms. Men are more likely than women to use alcohol and drugs while women are more likely to talk about depression to others.

In severe cases, both men and women may experience suicidal thoughts. If you notice symptoms of depression, seek professional help (see last chapter for resources).

### Mood Swings (Emotional Lability)

Emotional lability is a term for sudden mood swings. The person with a brain injury often shows feelings in an extreme and inappropriate way. Expressions and moods may change suddenly. This is caused by physical damage to areas of the brain that control emotions. It is important to understand that the person has lost some degree of control over emotional responses.

#### Examples of emotional lability:

- someone passing gas causes laughing fit
- very emotional when talking about grandmother who died 10 years before brain injury
- viewing pictures from past is a very emotional experience

#### Tips for minimizing emotional lability:

- Keep a "matter-of-fact" attitude.
- Ignore inappropriate emotions, but be nonjudgmental.
- Change the topic.
- Have the survivor take regular rest periods as fatigue may make these problems worse.



## EMOTIONAL

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### **Fear and Anxiety**

A brain injury can create stressful and unfamiliar circumstances, creating emotional responses such as fear and anxiety for the survivor. These are normal emotional responses to unknown and uncomfortable situations. Fear and anxiety often go along with depression.

#### **Signs of fear and anxiety:**

- constant physical tension
- excessive worry
- irritable, jumpy and restless
- panicky

#### **Tips for minimizing fear and anxiety:**

- Help the survivor to recognize the reasons for feeling fear and anxiety.
- Writing about fears and anxieties can often help to reduce them.

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### **Changes in Self-Esteem**

Self-esteem refers to a person's view of him or herself. A brain injury can mean a loss of status in significant areas of people's lives. This loss of status often impacts an individual's self image.

If the survivor has full recall of how life used to be before the injury, his or her new status in the family may be very discouraging. This decrease in self-esteem takes a very long time to rebuild. As a survivor, focusing on what you can do rather than what you cannot do may be the most effective way to help restore a positive self-image.