

Counseling & Brain Injury

The Importance of Psychological Counseling in Brain Injury Treatment and Recovery By Allison B. Ford, Ph.D, LPC

Brain injury, whether severe, moderate, or mild, can affect all levels of a person's functioning. For this reason, recovery is a complex process, and treatment for optimal recovery should address all components. This may include a combination of medication, cognitive remediation, and physical/occupational/recreational/speech therapies. One essential treatment component is supportive counseling and psychotherapy, both for the individual and family.

Comprehensive psychological counseling addresses multiple aspects of the individual's life changes, in order to facilitate development of a more stable, productive and self-sustaining lifestyle. The following is a list of some of the primary components to address in individual, family, and group therapy:

Changes in mood, thought patterns and behavior

- Expressing emotions about the injury including sadness, anxiety, fears, and anger; reducing intense moods
- Effective ways to interrupt the repetitive nature of intrusive thoughts, including negative, paranoid and suicidal thoughts
- Coping with distress related to the trauma, including: flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety, avoidance of triggers to emotional distress, social isolation, and sleep disturbance
- Understanding what happened, recalling the events without intense emotions, if memory loss learning what happened
- Letting go of self or other blame and gaining acceptance of injury, relinquishing the why's and what if's (why did this happen to me, what if I had done)

Managing the physiological effects of the injury

- Managing acute and chronic pain including headaches and migraines
- Coping with any permanent changes as a result of the injury, including physical, emotional and cognitive conditions
- Stabilization on medication and dealing with medication side effects
- Understanding the impact of injury on cognition and learning compensation

strategies

Changes in social interactions and relationships

- Addressing patient's social isolation through physical activity, productive use of time and fulfilling leisure interactions
- Building or rebuilding healthy relationships
- Decreasing potential for social conflict due to decreased empathy for others or misinterpreting others' behavior.
- Self-awareness of disinhibited behavior verbal outbursts, socially inappropriate behavior (touching, sexual jokes, and missing social cues).
- Participation in support groups with others who have been injured. Learning how to share your story without self pity and helping others adjust to an injury and major life changes.

Involvement of the family in treatment

- The patient's spouse, significant other, and minor aged children need to be an integral part of treatment. They are the providers of information clarification and support. Initially they need explanations about what is happening to their loved one and what they can expect in treatment.
- Depending on the severity of the injury, the spouse may have become the primary bread winner and care taker of the patient as a result of the injury. Many spouses have mixed emotions about the patient worries about stability, anger about mood changes, resentment for losses, etc.
- Coping with sexual dysfunction and changes in the marital relationship
- Often, mood swings or periods of rage may be directed toward spouse, increasing potential for conflict
- Locating additional support for family members through local support organizations and networks (such as NC BIA).

Emotional impact of the loss of work, potential transition to return to work

- Financial worries due to lost income
- Impact of job loss on self worth and pride
- Addressing fears associated with return to work. For example, fears related to interactions with coworkers or fear of safety issues (could injury happen again?) and visual reminders of the injury, if the injury occurred at work.
- Completing comprehensive career assessments and helping establish on the

job training or coaching.

- Working alternatives volunteering, helping other patients, support groups
- With comprehensive treatment, including psychological counseling to address these life changes after the injury, a survivor is more likely to regain a greater level of independence, esteem, and emotional functioning.

To inquire further about psychological supports for survivors or family members, please contact: Dr. Melissa Butler, PhD, 919-933-2000 ext. 124.