

## Coping with Post-TBI Anxiety & Stress

“Social engagements became opportunities for embarrassment and ridicule, causing Melissa terrible personal conflicts. She wanted to be out among the crowds, but simultaneously felt vulnerable and frightened by them. Melissa sank into long sulks and quiet withdrawals. The invitations stopped coming and the phone rarely rang,” writes author and TBI case manager Michael Paul Mason about Melissa Felteau who sustained a brain injury in a car crash.

Anxiety can come in many colors and textures following a brain injury. It can bubble up in crowded, noisy places. It can surface when there is too much quiet — when worries seem to snowball and there is no place to hide.

### **What exactly are anxiety and stress?**

Following a life-changing event like a brain injury, it’s normal to feel intense stress. But sometimes stress can build up and lead to anxiety. The main symptoms of anxiety are fear and worry. In turn, anxiety can cause or go hand-in-hand with other problems including:

- Restlessness
- Sleeplessness
- Depression
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty completing tasks
- Difficulty getting along with others

People can express anxiety in both emotional and physical ways — from being inordinately irritable to experiencing shortness of breath or feelings of panic. Anxiety becomes a significant concern when these feelings intensify to a point where they interfere with the tasks of life. Anxiety can also be a symptom or effect of post-traumatic stress disorder.

### **Treatment**

Like depression, chronic anxiety can cause low self-esteem and poor quality of life, and without treatment, symptoms can last longer or return. Anxiety is usually treated with medication and/or psychotherapy (counseling) by a trained professional. Treatment is usually quite successful, so there is little reason to delay seeking help. Here are a few strategies that people with anxiety after TBI have suggested:

- Share things that worry you with others.
- Set up a routine for your day and try to stick with it.
- Stay involved in life. Find activities that give you pleasure — ones you used to enjoy, or new ones.
- Be open to the support of others. Healthy relationships with family and friends are healing.
- Acknowledge your feelings, and then find ways to accept them. There is no shame in feeling anxious or depressed after a life-changing event like brain injury.

## **Learning from anxiety**

Sometimes facing your darkest emotions, like anxiety and depression, can help you better understand yourself. Melissa Felteau started meditating to help combat her own anxiety and depression; she found a new clarity. “That was my biggest problem,” she says. “I realized that I was always comparing myself to my pre-injury self. I was trapped in a vicious cycle of rumination and depression.”

Six years after her injury, through meditation and mindfulness, Melissa was able to shed her anxiety and use what she had learned to help herself — and others.

## **Three-Minute Breathing Space**

Use this quick meditation whenever you need to settle yourself into awareness of the present moment.

### **Step 1: Becoming Aware**

Try sitting up straight in a chair with feet lightly resting on the ground if possible. Closing your eyes, bring your awareness to your inner experience. Ask yourself:

- What is my experience right now?
- What thoughts are going through the mind?
- What feelings are here?
- Are there any sensations of tightness or stiffness?

### **Step 2: Gathering**

As best you can, redirect your focus to your breathing – the feeling of the belly moving in and out, the belly expanding as the breath flows in, and falling back when the breath flows out. Follow the breath all the way in, and all the way out, using the breath to anchor yourself in the present moment.

### **Step 3: Expanding**

Now breathe in to the whole body so you’re expanding your awareness. Sense your body as a whole. Breathe in and out, feeling the whole body rise and fall with each inhalation and exhalation. Feel the body as a whole. Take in your whole body and your facial expression. Just as it is.

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