

My Parent Has a TBI: A Guide for Teenagers

Having a parent who is recovering from a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) can make being a teenager very hard sometimes. Many teens tell us that their lives have become very complicated. Often, they are not sure where to turn for help. This article will explain some of the normal feelings and experiences many teenagers have when they are living with a parent who has a brain injury. If you are a teenager whose parent is injured, this article can help you get some ideas about how to best cope with the changes in your life and your family after TBI.

When you first learned that your parent was going to survive his or her injury, you probably went from being terrified that your parent would die, to feeling overwhelming relief that they were going to live. This big swing in emotions was probably the first in what many teens describe as the “roller-coaster of feelings” that can happen when a parent has a TBI. Now that your mom or dad is getting better, you might feel like you should feel better, too. However, for most people the roller-coaster of feelings continues for a long time after their mom or dad has come home from the hospital.

The most typical feelings and thoughts are:

Anger: I am mad that my mom/dad got hurt (mad at them for getting hurt, mad at the doctors for not helping them get back to normal, mad at God for letting it happen). I am mad at my mom/dad because they are so different now.

I am mad at myself for feeling the way I do (angry, sad, guilty, scared).

Sadness: I am sad that my life has changed so much (I want my old life back).

I am sad because this is all very unfair.

I am sad because I feel alone.

Guilt: I feel guilty because I am okay, but my mom/dad has such a hard time.

I feel guilty when I am having a good time.

I feel guilty when I get embarrassed by my parent or when I get angry with them.

Neglect: I don't get any attention anymore.

No one tells me what's happening.

My friends leave me out of things now.

I don't have anyone to talk to anymore.

I feel like my parents don't care about what I want anymore (plans with friends, ideas for my future, things we were supposed to do as a family, etc.).

The above feelings are normal for teenagers who have a parent recovering from brain injury. So, what should you do with all of these new thoughts and emotions? First, remember that the feelings listed are normal. Next, use some of the following suggestions to help you cope. There are many parts of having a parent with a TBI that are out of your control. However, there are some steps that you can take that may help in this difficult time.

Taking Care of You

Sometimes people think that ignoring their feelings or pretending to be happy will make things better. In the long run, this is not the best choice. Talk to a close friend, family member, or school/hospital counselor about your feelings. You may be surprised at how much this can help. Try keeping a journal of your feelings, too. Finally, see if there are any support groups in your area or at your school for kids whose parents are sick or hurt (you can ask a counselor about this). While other kids in these groups will have different experiences than you, they will probably also be able to understand many of the thoughts and feelings you are having.

Stay connected to your life. Make sure to spend time with friends, at youth groups, or on sports teams. While you may have many new responsibilities, it is important that you also make time for fun in your life.

Stay healthy! Getting enough sleep, eating healthy foods, drinking plenty of fluids, and staying away from drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes will help your body be in better shape. This is a huge advantage when dealing with stress. The healthier you are, the more effectively you will be able to cope with challenging thoughts and feelings.

Taking Care of Your Relationships

Your relationship with your parents has most likely changed. However, you can make the most of these changes by working hard at your relationship.

When you are feeling overwhelmed or sad, talk to your parents. Try to choose a “good day” and a time when your parents aren’t feeling extremely overwhelmed themselves. Sometimes taking notes on what you want to say before hand and then using the notes as a guide can help.

Remember that your parents are going through a very difficult time, too and may share many of the feelings that you have (anger, sadness, guilt, etc.). You all may be able to better understand one another if you can share these feelings together.

You don’t have to have one BIG talk with your parents. Talking a little, every day, can be less overwhelming for both you and them. Pick something that you would like to share each day and find a time together when you can sit for a few minutes to talk about it.

Your relationships with your friends may have changed, too. Keep in mind that for everyone, friendships tend to change over the course of our lives.

You may not have as much in common with some of your old friends as you used to. The good news is that many people report that friendships (old or new) can become more meaningful. When you develop a friendship that is comfortable and feels safe, take time to keep it active. Call and visit when you can or send a text or email letting your friend know when you are having a busy day or week.

Asking for help is not always an easy part of relationships. Many teens feel that they should not bother other people with their problems. Others worry what people will think if they ask for help. However, people who ask for help are often the ones who deal most successfully with big changes in their lives.

When friends, relatives, or neighbors offer help, before turning them down try to think if there is some way their help could be useful. If you don't need help right then, always ask for a rain check!

After TBI, many changes happen for everyone in a family. However, you can use some of these strategies to try to better cope with the changes you are experiencing. If you ever feel like your sadness, guilt, or anger is getting to be too much for you to handle, please talk to a counselor at your school or in the community right away. Unfortunately, there is no one article or person who can tell you exactly how things will continue to change for your family. It is true that your life has changed and will not likely go back to the way it was before your parent's injury. However, you will make it through this time. While you may not always feel strong, you have a strength inside of you that will carry you through the tough days.

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