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Personality Changes following Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Advice for Family Members and Carers

Many people experience changes to aspects of their personality following ABI. Some of these personality changes may include becoming increasingly self-centred, grumpy, emotional, euphoric, irresponsible, nervous, quiet or outspoken. Family members often report that these changes are the most difficult to deal with because it is as though the person with the ABI is no longer themselves but a different person altogether. This is increasingly difficult to tolerate when the person with the ABI is not aware of their changed personality, making it very hard for them to acknowledge and manage these changes. For example, a woman whose husband sustained an ABI described him as being like an overseas exchange student. He seemed unfamiliar to her and all the unspoken rules, their shared history and the ways in which they used to connect, were gone.

If someone you are supporting is experiencing personality changes following an ABI it may be helpful to:

- Identify and describe the exact nature of the personality change. To do this you may need to increase your vocabulary so that you have the words to describe these often subtle changes. You may find it helpful to discuss this with an ABI specialist to understand what the changes are, why they exist and the best ways to manage these changes.
- It is important to understand that personality changes are frequently a direct result of the injury to specific parts of the brain. As such, they are not deliberate or conscious on the part of the person with ABI.
- If possible, it is helpful to discuss the changes you have noticed with the person with the ABI (see 'Cognitive Changes following ABI' for advice regarding this discussion). If the person with ABI is able to identify and understand the changes in their personality, and has some awareness of when these changes are problematic, they will be more likely to work towards developing compensatory strategies.

- It is important that everyone involved with the person with ABI is encouraged to express their feelings about the changes in an open and respectful way. Some may mourn the loss of personality traits that existed prior to the injury. Others may need to communicate to the person with ABI exactly how the personality changes are impacting them and the relationship they have with the person. This may lead to identifying ways that they can both manage the situation such that their relationship is successfully maintained.
- Many of the expectations we have regarding the way people relate are implicit. In other words, we know the 'rules' of relating and operate by them, but often are not consciously aware of those 'rules'. As a result of the injury sustained, these 'rules' may be 'lost' following an ABI and it can be helpful to make them explicit for the person with the injury. For example, a person with increased self-centredness may be encouraged to ask questions of others in conversation as opposed to talking only about themselves.
- It may be helpful to assist the person with ABI to clearly identify behaviours and ways of relating to people that are appropriate and those that are inappropriate. Of course these behaviours will change depending on the context in which the exchange is occurring and the person with whom they are talking, and these variations should also be identified. Again, this is about making the 'rules' of exchange explicit for the person with ABI.
- It is also important to have a good understanding of the person's positive personality traits and assist them to find ways of connecting to others based on their communication strengths. It may be that the person with ABI now relates to others in a different way to that prior to the injury, but this may be no less rewarding or positive.

This information sheet has been prepared by Life Supports Counselling Service. Life Supports Counselling Service provides specialist counselling for people affected by Acquired Brain Injury. If you would like to discuss your situation with a counsellor, please feel free to contact our office on **1300 73 50 30**.

For more information sheets on topics related to acquired brain injury please see www.lifesupports.com.au/acquired_brain_injury.htm