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Psychological Trauma and Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Advice for Family Members

The first few hours, days or weeks after a person sustains an ABI are often highly traumatic for family members. They may be informed that their family member is likely to die, then they may see their loved one's severely injured body, and then they may be left to wait and see if their loved one will survive. Throughout this ordeal family members are negotiating the often unfamiliar and daunting environment of a hospital and trying to make sense of the messages being given to them by hospital staff. The person with the ABI usually has altered levels of consciousness throughout this process, and subsequently does not have distressing memories of this time.

This experience is considered traumatic when it overwhelms a person's ability to cope with, or integrate, the ideas, images, messages and emotions they are experiencing during this time.

Common symptoms of unresolved trauma include re-experiencing the trauma in the form of 'flashbacks', avoiding reminders of the trauma, excessive disturbance or lack of emotion when reminded of the trauma, and experiencing intense feelings of rage or sadness.

If the experiences that underlie these trauma responses are not addressed, then a person may be susceptible to developing anxiety, sleep difficulties, addictive behaviors and increased relationship and family difficulties.

If you, or someone you are supporting, is experiencing psychological trauma following an ABI it may be helpful to:

- Talk extensively about the traumatic experience including what you were thinking, what you worried about and what you were feeling at different times during this period. This is often the best way for your mind to integrate all that you experienced during this traumatic time.
- Identify the link between the traumatic experience and the feelings you are currently experiencing.

- Accept, express and talk about the strong emotions related to the trauma.
- Everyone responds differently; respect and accept the way you responded even if it is very different to the responses of other people. Your responses were simply part of the way you survived an experience that was overwhelming for you.
- Gather information and find out as much as you can about psychological trauma.
- Speak the unspeakable. If you thought the person was going to die you need to talk about that; if you hoped the person would die you need to talk about that. The meanings we make of experiences are as much a part of the experience as the things we see, smell or hear.
- Learn relaxation strategies that work for you. When you are overwhelmed or stressed use an effective relaxation strategy to calm yourself and reduce stress levels.

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