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Relationships and Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Advice for Couples

A relationship is likely to undergo significant change when one partner in that relationship sustains an ABI. There are many reasons for this change which relate to both the individual with the ABI and the relationship between the two individuals as a couple. The person with the ABI may, as a result of the injury, experience impaired cognitive or thinking abilities and altered mood and personality, all of which contribute to changes in the way that individual relates to his or her partner and the ability that he or she now has to fulfil life roles. In addition to these changes, the experience of ABI within a relationship generally causes stress and worry for both partners. This may include concern about the ability to parent children, financial stress, limitations on activities the couple can now share, sexual difficulties and uncertainty about the future. All these factors can add significant strain to a relationship.

If one person within a couple has an ABI, it may be helpful to:

- Try to keep the lines of communication open and ongoing between you, acknowledging that the experience of ABI has brought about change for each of you in different ways. Aim to understand, as much as possible, the changes in the individual with the ABI and the reason for these changes. They may be easier to live with if you both understand why they exist. An ABI professional may assist you to do this.
- As much as possible, try to accept these changes rather than fight against them. This does not mean you cannot grieve the losses that have occurred; in fact this is an important part of the process. Grieving losses and acceptance of changes will make it easier for you both to move forward adapting to life following ABI.
- It is important to be able to adapt your lives and activities as a couple to allow for the changed abilities of the individual with ABI. It is best if, as partners, you are able to openly discuss difficulties and work toward the best solution for managing these difficulties. This may involve a significant reallocation of roles and changes to the way things have been done in the past.

- With all the changes that have occurred in your relationship, it is sometimes easy to forget romance or expressions of fondness and love. Find ways to express your fondness for each other and reminders of the things that make you a couple.
- Often the partner without the ABI is called upon to care for the person with the ABI. It is important to find a way to connect together as partners rather than as carer and care recipient only. Different people do this in different ways. It may be that the individual with the ABI shows care for their partner in ways that they are able, or by allocating a time in the day where a mutually enjoyable activity is shared and roles of carer and person with ABI are not the focus.
- It is helpful if the partner without the ABI can be assertive and stand up for their own needs. It is important that they are able to make time for themselves, have the confidence, and a strategy, for managing disrespectful behaviour and an expectation that the burden of domestic chores is shared between themselves and the person with the ABI to the best of their ability. If they are not able to be assertive, it is likely that there will be considerable resentment toward the partner with ABI. Asserting these needs as a partner can be very difficult and it may be helpful to consult a counsellor experienced in dealing with people with ABI to learn how to do this.
- Both partners should aim to work towards having valued roles within the relationship. These roles may well be quite different to those that were held prior the ABI. There may be changes regarding who earns the money in the household, who cares for children and who does which household chores. Learning to accept and value new roles is an important part of the change process.
- It is essential to find ways to have fun together. This may mean discovering new activities in which you can both participate and enjoy or finding new ways to pursue activities you shared previously.
- Maintaining a loving relationship after an ABI can be very challenging, particularly if the ABI has resulted in significant losses in ability and changes in personality and behaviour. For those couples who experience a relationship that is markedly different after an ABI, it is helpful to openly and honestly review what is happening in that relationship. This may be through discussion between you or with the help of a professional.
- For some couples, contemplating the future may mean deciding to continue with the relationship while dealing with its challenges. For others it may mean coming to the realisation that the obstacles to a satisfactory relationship are impassable and deciding to separate. Some couples find that they no longer want to live as a couple, but

they are happy to live under the same roof with a new type of relationship. It is important to think creatively and find the best way to move forward. It may be helpful to be open to doing things differently such as having your own bedroom or living areas, identifying activities you pursue independently of each other and changing the expectations you have of each other within the relationship. As every relationship is different so is the experience of ABI, so it is important to determine the way to move forward that best meets your needs, as individuals, as a couple and as a family.

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