

ANXIETY

It is natural for people who have been involved in a traumatic experience to feel anxious afterwards. If a person has been assaulted, or involved in a road traffic accident, going back into the original situation is likely to increase anxiety. However that anxiety will die away with time.

Longstanding problems and phobias can occur if the person continues to avoid those situations rather than face his fears.

General symptoms of stress and anxiety, such as panic attacks, worry and tension, are also common. Undoubtedly, life after a head injury is enormously stressful. Imagine being inactive for a lengthy period when medically ill, then attempting to get 'back to normal' and finding that there are so many things that you cannot do as well as you could before the injury. Confidence is at a low level, and the world becomes a frightening, distressing place. Adjustment to this new situation takes time. Feelings of anxiety and depression are normal.

In the early stages after a severe injury, the patient is naturally dependent on family and professional carers. However, over time, the person changes, learning to do more things for himself. It is important at this point for carers to 'step back' and encourage independence, even though the individual at times may be inclined to 'cling on' to the safety and security of the carer. There is a fine line between being helpful and encouraging independence, and doing too much for the person and allowing him to become dependent. If he becomes dependent, his anxiety about going into new situations will stay high, and his confidence in his own ability will remain low.

Coping with Anxiety (for the Person with the head injury)

1. Talk about your fears, worries and anxieties. Ventilate your feelings. Do not bottle them up. Talk to other people in similar situations; join a head injury Support Group.
2. Learn ways of relaxing and staying calm. This might include learning an anxiety management technique such as muscle relaxation, slow breathing, distracting yourself from worrying thoughts, positive thinking or yoga. If the problem is too great, seek professional advice from a clinical psychologist or counsellor with knowledge of head injury.
3. Try not to avoid difficult situations that make you feel anxious. The more you push yourself and face the fear, the quicker the anxiety will disappear.

4. Do not be too hard on yourself. Things have changed in your life. Perhaps you can no longer do some of the things that you used to do, unfortunately your expectations are telling you that you still can. Those high expectations need lowering; this is emotionally painful and will create anxiety.

Coping with Anxiety (for Family and Carers)

1. Do not let yourself become the only friend of the person with the head injury.
2. Try not to do things for him. Encourage as much self-sufficiency as possible. Encourage him to out on his own.
3. Encourage him to meet new people, one at a time. Do not push him into a large group which is completely overwhelming.
4. Set simple tasks to begin with, and then, when he feels confident, make them progressively more difficult. Confidence is built by small successes. For example, a first step might be: 'Go into a shop and buy a newspaper'; gradually work up to the most difficult situation, which might be: 'Catch a bus into town, on your own and buy some clothes.'

Source: Powell, T. (1994) *Head Injury A Practical Guide* (pp.122-125). United Kingdom: Winslow Press