

## Living with Traumatic Brain Injury - Carol's Voice

One moment that will stay with me forever is hearing Carol's (my wife of only four months) voice for the first time. Carol had been told that there might be a possibility that I wouldn't remember who she was. Thankfully, as soon as I heard Carol's voice I knew I was safe, and I can't say how pleased Carol was to be recognised.

Something terrible must have happened for me to be in hospital. I was on a motorbiking holiday in Scotland and while riding around a left hand bend travelling at about 85mph, I lost control and crashed. I could have died on the roadside as a result of my injuries; luckily for me, I was in a group of about thirty other riders, some of whom were off duty policemen, and the first car to happen upon the crash was a nurse on her way to work. When the ambulance arrived and I was stabilised, I was taken to the nearest hospital specialising in neurological injuries, which was Ninewells Hospital in Dundee.

As time went by, I became more aware of my surroundings and that I had spent the last few weeks in a coma. I had only broken my ankle on the initial impact and the rest of my injuries were related to being thrown around like a rag doll. My helmet was shattered like an eggshell and this gave the doctors their biggest worry; it was obvious that I had sustained a serious head injury. My accident and coma had taken me back to zero; I was like a newborn baby in an adult's body.

Physically, my recovery was progressing in leaps and bounds and all my body needed was time to heal itself. There was no stopping Carol and I once I had gained some strength in my arms and legs. People think I'm joking when I tell them how badly damaged I was, but because there are no bandages or disabilities people assumed I was fully recovered.

Unfortunately, as I improved physically I slowly deteriorated mentally. Mentally, my recovery wasn't going so well. Carol and I hadn't been prepared for the effects of a head injury, we had to learn fast or there would be problems ahead. In hospital, the doctors and nurses knew how to deal with a head injury sufferer, but out in the big wide world it was a different story. This is when my frustration started to grow and I noticed that my 'anger threshold' was virtually non-existent. In the early stages of my recovery I had no self-control and no inhibitions and I could only deal with the easy, simple and small decisions and whenever I did do something, it had to be done right first time with no exception, thinking in black and white, right or wrong. This was the easy way out and required no thought at all, I wasn't concerned with the 'what if'; the 'what if' required thinking, and if it went wrong I would get annoyed with myself and anyone else who was near me. With the frustration came the depression, and I started to wear black all the time because it was easy to pick out something to wear, because black went with everything. I tried to make life as easy as possible by eliminating all the small decisions that weren't important, like what to wear. I felt like I was on train tracks heading in one direction and I couldn't get off, I was so focused on my decision, whether it was right or wrong.

I was the same person on the inside but on the outside, I came across as an angry, arrogant and difficult person. The behaviour of some family and friends towards me had changed and I was starting to be treated like an old age pensioner who couldn't take care of himself; regardless of what I said some people wouldn't take any notice of what I was telling them and only did what they thought was best; best for whom was my question, best that they were seen helping. I was starting to be treated like an object and not a person. There were many times I just wanted to scream at people because they just weren't listening to me and the less they listened, the more frustrated and angry I became. I had

lost my motorbike (which was one of my passions), and people in general were treating me like an idiot. A lot of the time I did need help, but help on my terms and help that I wanted, not help that people thought I needed. I did need support and guidance, but more importantly I needed to do things for myself. I needed to learn the 'hows and whys' and I couldn't learn with people trying to help me all the time. Over a period of time I had lost my confidence and I was starting to feel like a worthless human being and no good to anyone. My frustration and anger was growing everyday and if I didn't take action to tackle it I would be in trouble.

One night Carol and I sat down and we talked about the problems I was having I had so many I didn't know which problem to tackle first. The first major problem I needed to solve was to change my working environment. At work, some of my work colleagues were taking advantage of my condition and the only decisive way to change this was to seek out new employment. This was one of the hardest decisions I had to make because I had worked for the same company for the last five years. I had worked hard and was promoted from being a worker on a production bench to a studio manager, so I was very angry at having to make this decision.

To make forward progress with my recovery, I needed to leave my past behind and find new employment. Two years had passed and I was starting my new job. I felt like I'd just climbed Mt Everest. I was so excited and I just couldn't believe what I had achieved. Both Carol and I had worked hard to get me into this position and I knew that it was all up to me now to make it work.

To show myself that I was a decent person and that I was making progress with my recovery, I sat down with a pen and paper and I wrote down everything that I had accomplished since my crash. Every little step I made was listed, starting from surviving the crash and waking up from my coma in August 2000 to starting a new job and changing my working environment in September 2002. This helped with several problems; it showed me just how much I had accomplished in the first two years after the crash. I found lots of information from various websites on the internet relating to anger management and how to control my temper when dealing with obnoxious people. Reading my accomplishment list helped with my frustration and anger but my brain was still racing ahead at full speed, my mind was like a torture device that had been programmed to destroy me.

Eventually, I found what I needed to slow my mind down: physical exercise. The more physically exhausted I became the clearer my mind became and if I kept on exercising my mind just emptied, this was what I called memory clearance. It was bliss, for the first time in months I had nothing on my mind. This was the turning point in my recovery. My confidence was increasing and my frustration and anger were becoming a thing of the past. I now accepted that things can go wrong and that I'm not perfect. It does take more effort to think about the 'what if' and thinking in black and white, right or wrong takes no effort at all. I started to realise that I had been my own worst enemy.

There tends to be a misconception that life after a brain injury is all doom and gloom. I must admit that the first year after the accident was really difficult although we received a lot of support from the various therapists at the rehab unit and from Headway, the organisation supporting brain injury sufferers and their families. I also wrote 'Stepped Off' - a book about my journey back to health, accompanied with a website (<http://www.steppedoff.co.uk>). The aim is to help others going through a similar experience, although no two accidents and no two-brain injuries are the same.



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