



Healing Your MARRIAGE After Brain Injury

By: Jeff Kreutzer and Emilie Godwin, Virginia Commonwealth University

Couples often report big changes in their marriage after injury. Professionals who work with them often find that people face common challenges in rebuilding their lives and relationships as they try to find a new normal. By understanding common post-injury challenges and learning to use effective coping strategies, you can improve your marriage and build a healthy, satisfying relationship.

The following three stories illustrate some of the typical situations couples face after brain injury:

♥ STEPHEN AND JENNA

had just two months to go until their dream wedding when their lives were changed forever. Driving home after choosing their wedding cake, a tractor trailer crashed into their car. While Jenna suffered minor physical injuries, Stephen sustained a severe TBI. Now, one year post-injury, the couple is married, but life is not the fairy tale they had hoped for before the crash.

[JENNA]

Before the injury, we planned everything together, but now I have to do it all. When I try to talk to him about important things—the bills, our future—he gets irritated with me. I don't know how to talk to him anymore and I don't know how long this marriage will last.

[STEPHEN]

Jenna and I used to be partners; now it's her show. She doesn't trust me to make any decisions. She acts like I'm a bother if I need her to repeat or explain something. I feel worthless in our marriage. In her eyes, I can't do anything right.

♥ LAMONT AND DEANDRIA

had come to a conclusion that their marriage wasn't working. They had begun to live their lives separately, maintaining different homes while sharing responsibility for their three children. Then, Deandria fell off of a ladder and sustained a mild TBI. Although she was only briefly hospitalized, it soon became clear that she could not return to her same job or care for the children on her own. The couple decided to move back in together and rebuild their marriage.

[DEANDRIA]

I was happy to be on my own, working on my career and taking care of our kids. Now everything I thought I wanted is different. I can't make him understand that there are things I just can't do, no matter how much I want to. My focus is on getting better and all Lamont talks about is how I used to be. Why can't he understand that my priorities are different now?

[LAMONT]

Sometimes I feel so guilty. We both wanted out, but now she needs me and I don't have that choice anymore. Plus, she's not the woman I married. She used to love being a mom and helping others in her job. Now all she thinks about is herself. The kids and I know that she's hurt, but it's like that is all that matters to her. If we're going to be together again, I need a partner. I want my wife back.

♥ SARAH AND CARLOS

had been happily married for 18 years. Carlos worked in a job he loved and Sarah stayed home with their four children. After Carlos suffered a stroke, the couple spent the first six months just focusing on his rehab. However, two years later, their lives are not back to normal. With Carlos unable to return to work, Sarah has taken a part-time job while Carlos stays home with the children. The family now has one-fourth of their former income and everyone is struggling to make sense of this new life.

[SARAH]

He's just angry all the time now and I don't know what to expect when I walk in the door. I don't want this life either, but somehow it seems to be all my fault. I can't stand to be around him for more than a few minutes and the kids are scared of him all of the time.

[CARLOS]

I loved being able to provide for my family. Now, I feel like I'm nobody. Sarah rubs it in my face that she's the one working and when I try to work around the home it seems like I never do anything the way she thinks it should be done. I still love her so much, but I'm pretty sure she will leave me soon. She goes out at least two nights a week and says it's with her new co-workers, but I know better than that.



The “Healthy Marriage” Quiz

To help you understand more about your marriage, read the statements in each section below and check True or False.

1. Communication Challenges:

My spouse has no idea how I am feeling.

True False

Talking about our problems only makes things worse.

True False

We are always arguing about something.

True False

He/she doesn't hear anything I say.

True False

2. Changing Responsibilities:

I have to do everything myself.

True False

We don't know who should do what in our house anymore.

True False

My spouse acts more like a child than our children.

True False

I can't trust my spouse to do things right.

True False

3. Changing Priorities:

We're so busy going to doctor's appointments, who has time to work on a marriage?

True False

We don't have an intimate relationship anymore.

True False

He/she used to care about our family, now I'm not so sure.

True False

4. Emotional & Personality Changes:

My spouse gets upset at anything I say or do.

True False

I'm married to a stranger.

True False

I'm worried all the time about what he/she will do next?

True False

Look at the pattern of True's and False's in each of the four categories. The more items you answered True, the more likely you are having trouble in that area.

Tips to Heal Your Marriage

Read, think about, and try the suggestions below to improve your marriage:

Communication:

- Ⓢ Patiently listen to your partner and show a positive attitude. Are there parts of what he/she is saying that you can agree with?
- Ⓢ When your partner makes a statement be cautious about disagreeing. Edit your thoughts to avoid saying only negative things that come to mind.
- Ⓢ Be willing to compromise.

Changing Responsibilities:

- Ⓢ To avoid misunderstandings, have an honest discussion and make a list of who is in charge of what.
- Ⓢ Once the list is agreed upon, expect that your partner will attend to his/her jobs perhaps in a different way or in a different time frame than you would like. Even when you think something could be done differently, avoid being critical.
- Ⓢ Always express real appreciation for the things that your spouse does, even small things. People who feel appreciated are more likely to contribute their time and energy to help each other.

A Change in Priorities:

- Ⓢ Make a commitment to having a good relationship, something you did well when you first met one another. Plan times when you and your partner can enjoy something fun – a movie on television, a board game, a walk – and make this an activity that can't be pushed aside for something else.
- Ⓢ Focus on the positives in your new life. Couples that are happiest make five positive statements about their relationship or their partner for every one negative statement. So, even if you are having a bad day, make sure to point out one or two good things about your spouse or your relationship and say them – out loud.

Emotional & Personality Changes:

- Ⓢ Look for opportunities to laugh with your spouse. Sometimes at first laughter can feel forced. The more you try to have a good time with your partner, the more natural having fun together will feel. Couples who laugh together are lots happier.
- Ⓢ When your spouse does something you don't expect, see if there is a different way to look at it. Rather than feeling embarrassed, hurt, or angry, see if you can find a reason to smile.
- Ⓢ It is o.k. to expect and demand that your partner treats you with respect. Please do not tolerate hurtful behavior, even if it seems to make things easier for a short time. If your spouse says something or does something hurtful, calmly state “I will not allow you to treat me this way” and then leave the situation.
- ♥ Remember, brain injury or not, many couples do not agree on everything.

Remaining married and happy is a challenge for many couples with or without brain injury. Whatever your situation, you can have a positive and healthy relationship by understanding the challenges in your marriage and making a commitment to treat your partner well. If your problems seem more difficult than you can handle, seek help from a local marriage counselor who knows about brain injury.