



# TBI TODAY

News, Ideas, and Resources from the Virginia TBI Model System

## HOW TO CLEAN UP STINKING THINKING AND COPE BETTER WITH NEGATIVE EMOTIONS AFTER BRAIN INJURY

After brain injury, people often find themselves having a hard time feeling hopeful. Feelings of sadness and nervousness are common. Thinking positively about the future can be challenging. Following injury, a person or family member may find the following statements familiar:

- ☹️ “I will always have problems and will *never* be the same again.”
- ☹️ “This is so *unfair*. The driver that hit me was reckless and didn’t even get hurt.”
- ☹️ “My friends don’t return my phone calls. *Nobody* likes me anymore.”
- ☹️ “I’ll *never* be able to get or hold down a job with a brain injury.”
- ☹️ “The brain injury happened 3 years ago. He *ought to* be doing better by now.”

Are you concerned about how you or a family member

with brain injury is coping? You may be wondering how you can tell if emotions are getting in the way. To help you better understand common symptoms of depression or anxiety, read the list of words in the “Are Emotions Getting in My Way?” Questionnaire, below. Check off the words that describe you or someone you know with brain injury.

Think about the items you checked and the ones you did not. The more items you checked off, the more unhappy you or a loved one may be.

These types of statements are warning signs of **Stinking Thinking**. Several examples of Stinking Thinking you may recognize are:

- ◊ *All-or-None* Thinking (or Black or White Thinking). Thinking about things as extremes – either all good or all bad.
- ◊ Over-generalizing. Using words like “always” and “never.”
- ◊ Mental Filtering. Looking only at the negatives while ignoring the positives.

### Are Emotions Getting In My Way? Questionnaire

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling down, blue, hopeless, or tense                     | <input type="checkbox"/> Can’t stop thinking about problems                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Crying spells  | <input type="checkbox"/> Low energy  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Irritability or restlessness                               | <input type="checkbox"/> Appetite increase or decrease                                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling guilty or worthless                                | <input type="checkbox"/> Avoiding others   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Getting frustrated easily                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Not enjoying things   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much | <input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty making decisions, concentrating, or remembering things |

With permission of the authors, this article has been reprinted from the Summer 2005 issue of *TBI Today*, published by Virginia Commonwealth University’s Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation’s Neuropsychology Service. This newsletter, is a project of the Virginia Model System, which is funded by the US Department of Education’s National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR). The views, opinions, and information presented herein are those of the publisher and are not necessarily endorsed by the US Dept. of Education.

- ◆ Labeling. Putting negative labels on yourself, others, or things in your life.
- ◆ *Jumping to Conclusions.* Believing you know the facts without proof.
- ◆ *Emotional Reasoning.* Thinking your emotions are facts or reality.
- ◆ *Should Statements.* Using statements with the words “should”, “ought to”, or “have to.”

When thoughts are twisted by negative emotions, **Stinking Thinking** is the result. Survivors of brain injury and their family or friends may think they can't win at life or they are a victim of life when twisted thoughts take hold. With mounting difficulties related to living with brain injury, Stinking Thinking can become a habit that is hard to break.

Stinking Thinking often leads people to feel sad, worried, and hopeless. To feel better, try to “freshen up” your thinking. Here are a number of ideas that survivors and their families find helpful to change negative thoughts after brain injury:

- ◆ **Remember, life is not painted black or white.** Much of life takes place in the gray areas. Most things in life are not all good or all

bad, but somewhere in between.

- ◆ **Misery is optional.** Feeling miserable keeps you stuck in the past. The past is something no one can change. Focus on changing the things you can and accepting what you have no control over.
- ◆ **Emotions are not facts.** Just because you feel a certain way, does not make it true. Notice when emotions are getting the best of your thoughts and check out the facts first.
- ◆ **The future is not set in stone.** You cannot be certain about what tomorrow will bring. Try to avoid making negative assumptions about the future.
- ◆ **View “mistakes” as life lessons.** Life is full of opportunities to learn new skills, make new friends, and try new activities. Learn from mistakes and do better next time.
- ◆ **Avoid seeking perfection.** Instead, pay attention to progress made after injury. Remember, recovery from brain injury is a life-long journey for survivors and their families and friends.
- ◆ **Practice new ways of thinking** to help you feel

more positive during the process of recovering from brain injury.

If you or someone in your family is having trouble with negative emotions, individual or family counseling may help. Psychologists at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Medical Center in Neuropsychology and Rehabilitation Psychology Services provide therapy to persons with brain injury and their family members as part of standard care and research. In addition, researchers at VCU are looking at the best ways to identify coping and adjustment problems after brain injury. Another study at VCU is available for persons with brain injury and their families to treat common post-injury problems. Individuals with brain injury and their family members are encouraged to call for more information about research VCU has to offer.

*This column was written by Lee Livingston and Jeff Kreutzer from the VCU TBI Model System Program. For more information about outpatient rehabilitation services and VCU research programs, please contact Jenny Marwitz by phone at 804-828-3704, toll free at 1-866-296-6904, or by email at [jhmarwit@vcu.edu](mailto:jhmarwit@vcu.edu).*



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