

BEING A CAREGIVER

Finding one self in the role of a care giver for a brain injured loved one is an extremely frightening situation. It usually happens within a split second and within that moment the lives of many people are changed forever. There is no warning and also no training. Unsuspecting caregivers could vary from mother, father, wife, husband, partner, and child.

I am the mother of a son, 30, who was involved in a car accident 10 yrs ago. We were told that he would probably not live, then that he would be spastic all over his body and that we should look out for a home for him where he could be cared for.

Today he lives on his own, cares for his dog, does his own shopping for groceries, uses his own cellphone, bank card, computer, goes to the mall and the movies by himself, has a wonderful sense of humour, general knowledge and is not spastic.

However, getting to this stage did not happen by itself. It has required hard work, determination, patience, sticking to one's belief against all odds, in spite of the negativity of others and with the help of wonderful therapists and God.

Having said all that, it is also important to be realistic and accept certain facts, but not before trying all possibilities.

Situations which we had/have to deal with are common in most severe cases. Each case is unique however, therefore the symptoms could vary to a more or lesser extent in each individual case. Below follows a list of possible symptoms:

- Fatigue
- Lack of concentration
- Bad memory – problem making new memories
- Carrying through of new information
- Orientation
- Self esteem
- Inappropriate behavior
- Planning
- Outburst of anger
- Sexual behavior
- Suspicion

We did not have to deal with all the above personally, but at some or other stage we encountered them at some of our support groups. The problems do not seem to emerge at the same time, but rather as the person

progresses and comes into contact with new situations. I will discuss the different symptoms in future editions.

However, all of the symptoms are strange to the family members and could cause stress within the family environment. A good psychologist with experience in TBI matters can do wonders for the injured person. Also a Neuro trained Occupational therapist, even a few years after the injury occurred.

The caregiver and the rest of the family also go through different stages and changes. Through the years I have observed that everyone in the family is affected in a different way, depending on their age and on what was going on in their lives at that stage. Their reactions to - and relationship with the injured person changes through the years. One fact is certain, however, no one goes unaffected. It is a good idea to see a good family therapist. The situation is unnatural, no one is trained for it, and most of us need help in getting perspective and to find our own place and way of dealing with it.

Anyone who experiences the explosion of shock in the head when hearing the terrible news and the word 'critical condition', the nauseating feeling of all enveloping fear when seeing a loved one in the ICU in that "fighting death" state, the uncertain "not knowing" hell, cannot go unaffected. It can happen to anybody at any time regardless of title, address or bank balance.

Therefore the caregiver/s, family members also need care and careful looking after, even if they claim that they 'are fine'.