

Brain Injuries: Sometimes Subtle, Always Devastating

March 28, 2019

March is Brain Injury Awareness Month. Over the years, I've worked extensively with survivors of traumatic brain injury (TBI).

When people think about TBI, they typically envision someone with a severe and obvious impairment. However, TBI often doesn't work that way. Physical appearances are not always what they seem, and the presence of a TBI can oftentimes be overlooked. A significant percentage of brain injury cases are not obvious nor easily detectable even by advanced imaging studies. Therefore, it is sometimes challenging, even for medical professionals, to recognize a concussion or other brain injury in a patient.

To an outsider looking in, perhaps there is nothing noticeably wrong. Yet, and particularly for the people close to the survivor, something is definitely amiss. I have had countless family members tell me that their loved one simply isn't the same after an injury.

Consider this. A person is involved in a wreck. The force of the impact causes their head to violently whip forward and backwards, causing the brain to slam back in forth in the skull. Immediately following the collision, the person is dazed and confused and may struggle to remember not only the details of the collision but also the date and time. Days or weeks later, family and friends notice that their loved one hasn't been the same since the wreck. They continue to have memory issues, can be easily angered, or even have difficulties performing basic daily activities. While this is just a brief example, it is important to know that the symptoms of a TBI vary from person to person and may even take a while to truly present themselves.

Memory problems, cognitive issues, or personality changes can be subtle and are just some of the symptoms associated with TBI. These affect survivors' jobs, relationships, emotional well-being, and often their loved ones in an ongoing, puzzling, and intensely frustrating spiral of confusion. Apart from being enormously widespread, the additional tragedy of TBI is that it simultaneously takes an incredible toll not only the survivors, both also their families and caregivers (particularly spouses and children).

Awareness is key, and the first step towards coping with this life-altering tragedy.