

UNDERSTANDING LACK OF INSIGHT AND AWARENESS

Awareness and insight refer to the ability to be able to understand and judge our own strengths and weaknesses, and to appreciate how our actions are affecting others. This sensitivity to others and the ability to monitor and subtly adjust our own behaviour when appropriate is an important skill which often gets overlooked.

Man seems to be the only species in the animal kingdom who possesses this ability to be so self-aware. Not surprisingly these clusters of higher mental skills are thought to be located in the frontal lobes of the brain, and are therefore very likely to be impaired in the majority of closed head injuries. Some people with severe damage to these areas of the brain never fully regain those subtle skills of self-awareness, insight, sensitivity and empathy.

A second reason for the existence of these types of problems is the very nature and circumstances of a traumatic head injury. The majority of people who have had an injury will start off with poor insight and awareness, which will gradually improve over a period of months and years. Just think – we spend our whole lives building up a picture or image of ourselves, we learn about our strengths and weaknesses, we develop expectations, hopes, plans, attitudes and beliefs about ourselves and very suddenly everything is changed. The patients may fully regain consciousness a few days or weeks after the initial injury and find that the physical reality of his world has changed, but his belief and expectations are exactly the same as they have always been.

The reality of the situation takes a very long time to sink in and alter the person's beliefs about himself and his future. The situation is perhaps hampered by the fact that the patient may not be able to remember the accident or the traumatic time afterwards. Relatives and carers standing on the touchline, observing broken bodies and experiencing the trauma of their loved one being close to death, have painful memories which in some ways help them to register the full extent of the injury. The person with the injury often misses all that.

When consciousness is gradually regained he may be more aware of the most obvious tangible problems, like a stiff shoulder or difficulty moving a leg; then, after a while, he becomes more aware of the subtle cognitive and behavioural problems, and only then does the reality of his disability gradually dawn.

A third factor which contributes to lack of awareness is man's natural tendency to deny the existence of really painful realities as a way of coping and preserving sanity and self-esteem. The process of denial is a natural stage which we all pass through in any loss or bereavement. It is almost as if for our own self-preservation our minds only let us be aware of what we can handle emotionally. In any grieving process denial is naturally replaced by anger, sadness or depression and finally acceptance.

COPING WITH POOR INSIGHT (FOR FAMILY AND CARERS)

1. Remember that insight and awareness gradually improve and denial is a natural way of coping.
2. If the person with the injury wants to engage in an activity that is not too dangerous, but you are confident that they will fail, allow them to do it. Although they may be disappointed, they need to fail to appreciate the reality of the situation and gain insight.
3. When the person with the injury has difficulties and displays problems, draw attention to this in a calm, non-judgemental, non-challenging way. Don't gloat or badger.
4. Try to encourage the patient to join a head injury support group. There will be people at various stages of recovery, and those who have worked through some of their denial may be able to help him recognise and accept his problem areas.
5. Do not be fooled by the person's threats to discontinue occupational therapy or other therapy on the grounds that the tasks are childish. In all likelihood he is experiencing grave difficulty with these tasks, making it all the more important for him to stick with the activity.
6. Involve the individual with the head injury in meetings and decisions about care. Ask professionals to send copies of written reports and assessments to the person with the head injury so he can see exactly what the situation is.