

Dr. Jeff Kreutzer and Dr. Taryn Stejskal About What Happens To A Family After A Loved One Sustains a Brain Injury

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What happens to families after a loved one sustains a brain injury?

Dr. Jeff Kreutzer: That's a hard question to give the simple answer because it really depends, a lot really depends on who is injured, is it a child in which case if a child especially young child, it's, it's certainly very, very, very devastating for the parents, a lot of times parents feel very guilty. Is it a spouse, may be a couple in their 30s or 40s who have children? Is it an elderly parent who's, who's fallen and had a brain injury from the fall? So it's really hard to, to generalize too much. What we can say is that brain injury is catastrophic, for most families it causes changes in roles, people have a sense of, of great loss and a sense of confusion and for a period of time people feel very hopeful, but that hope is often left with a sense of fear that life will never be the same.

Dr. Taryn Stejskal: Yeah one thing that we'd like to say is that if you've seen one brain injury, you've seen one brain injury, but we've found that amongst the uniqueness of people that we work with, there are some universals and you know when we work with families, we find that there is often a renegotiation of roles and relationships and that's a really broad way of saying a lot of stuff changes.

But what that means is if the person who was providing for the family financially is injured then things shift within that family system to figure out how that family is now going to support themselves. If the person that was caring for the children is injured then things shift in a different way to figure out how do we care for these young children and the parent that was injured? And in particular I have had the pleasure of working with a lot of adult children that in their 30s and 40s that were out on their own living independent lives and then as a result of being injured went back to live with their family members.

What I see is that there is a lot of renegotiation between parents and adult children about boundaries and roles and even things like curfew or, or going out with friends. Parents in situations even with an adult child are often times fearful, at the very least anxious that their child is going to get hurt again and parents lose a lot of their independence as does the adult child that returns home, so a lot of, a lot of very complex dynamics for sure.

What are some families that stand out who had a difficult time but are doing better now?

Dr. Taryn Stejskal: Some of the families that stand out for me that as having been a family that was having a difficult time, but they're doing much better now. Again the families for me are the ones that do all the heavy lifting. You know they, they live it, they are very courageous, they are very brave, they're willing to come into my office or Jeff's office or our office and look at themselves and how they are contributing to whatever issues exist. Families that do best tend to be families that are able to talk with each other and not just talk about the weather or what they saw on TV but talk about feelings and experiences and really share with one another and check in.

In particular I worked with a family where the fear of one person getting angry kept other family members from communicating with one another and so when we, when we were able to talk about some of those quote unquote hot button issues, within the session and keep them calmer and keep some of the anger out of the room, then those topics didn't become taboo any more and that family was able to communicate with each other in an honest way and learned how to deal with anger in a way that didn't stymie or block their communication in the future.