

## Dr. Jeff Kreutzer and Dr. Taryn Stejskal About What Kinds Of Support They Provide

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### What Kinds of Support Do You Provide

**Dr. Taryn Stejskal:** Well the kinds of support that we provide we have a number of different types of support that we offer both at VCU, Virginia Commonwealth University and out in the community and also things that are very portable that people can take with them. So probably the first thing that I would mention would be our brain injury family intervention which is the five session, each of the sessions is two hours, and we offer that to talk about some of the most important issues that families face after injury. We also see individuals, couples, and families on a regular basis for family and, and individual therapy and, and we have a number of printed materials that people can take home in the context of the BIFI, the Brain Injury Family Intervention or things that people might find useful at conferences. We give a number of conference presentations both to professional and also to families and people that have survived brain injury and we also volunteer with the, with the local support group.

**Dr. Jeff Kreutzer:** We think that people really appreciate support in different ways and that's why we think that some people do well with groups, some people feel comfortable talking to other people who've been through the same thing, other people like to speak to someone one on one and so we think it's important to have a variety of options that people might take advantage of and supplement those options with educational materials that help people understand what's normal after brain injury. Taryn and I have done a good amount of traveling and it's amazing to us. We've talked to families from other countries, Canada, England and it's really interesting because even though the cultures in these countries are somewhat different, the experience that family members have in different countries is very much the same, many families whether they got through the US healthcare system, Australian system, the Italian system. Many families go through the same thing and it seems like the kinds of support they need are quite similar.

I think one really tough thing for families is where they do lose support the family members and people with brain injury often feel very lonely and they do lose support from their friends. Many people find that their friendships end, and don't know who to turn to. The other thing is that many times members of the extended family, people they might see two or three times a year may be once a month, people in extended family often have no idea what the family and the person with the injury is going through and so often the patient, the survivor in the family feel alienated from their family and their communities and that's why we think it's so important to make available individual and group support options.

### What do you do when someone says they are ready to give up?

**Dr. Taryn Stejskal:** Yeah, you know when someone comes to us and they say I'm ready to throw in the towel, I've had enough, this is just too hard, one thing that Jeff and I were talking about today is you know there are many times in relationships or at least one time in some relationships where somebody does want to throw in the towel and you know one thing that we would do is we would kind of reframe that. When people say I'm ready to throw in the towel, often times that doesn't mean they want to quit the relationship, they just want to quit what's happening right now. You know having a brain injury brings a lot of stress to relationships, a lot of doctors appointments, a lot of financial bills, and when someone says they are ready to throw in the towel, I, I would really say you know it's really hard to, to be living your life right now, this is not something that you expected to happen and brain injury is a really difficult thing. We encourage couples to hang in there as long as they can. I tell couples when I'm working with them even if there's some question about whether or not they're going to be staying together, I'll say you

know I'm going to be working on your relationship as long as you're going to be working on your relationship. We make give people a timeline, we may say you know I know you're really frustrated, I know you're really overwhelmed, I know your spouse or partner is very different than the person that they used to be or you're very different from the person that you used to be, why don't we table any big decisions right now and check in three or four months down the road and see how things are.

**Dr. Jeff Kreutzer:** You know one, one thing that we're very concerned about is that it's important to be careful not to take people literally and even though everyone in the room is speaking in English, Taryn and I often talk about translating, trying to understand what the person is saying and sometimes what people say isn't really what they mean and our interpretation throwing the towel is really a person saying they're really stressed out, they're feeling very burdened, they feel like they want to give up and we have a saying trying is much better than not trying, but certainly people can feel that way and it's and most important thing is to acknowledge the person's feelings.

Another issue and Taryn and I have had a lot of discussions around some of these issues, another issue is the importance of people having hope and a person who says, I want to throw in the towel is often a person who feels hopeless and feeling hopeless in some ways is, is a common feeling that people have when they're trying really hard for a long period of time and they don't feel like they're getting anywhere, so we find that someone says they want to throw in the towel or something to that effect that's time where they really need a lot of support and one issue that we talk a lot about with our families and, and people with brain injury is some, sometimes people don't feel like they can communicate about what's concerning them, sometimes people feel like oh I can't tell anybody because they might get upset and so they stop communicating and so the important thing is for, is to encourage people to communicate their feelings, but also feel comfortable asking for help. Some people see asking for help is a sign of weakness, for some people it's trust issue, they don't feel like they can trust anybody and so helping the person feel comfortable asking for help, acknowledging their feelings, offering support, and offering to be there when they need someone to talk to that can help that person feel a little bit more hopeful and little bit more by trying. I think most people working for a long time hard problem, feel like giving up, often that feeling comes from the sense of being frustrated and not wanting to feel frustrated anymore. So when I hear that it just makes me think that, that this is a time where that person needs a lot more support and that's, that's what we try to provide.

**Dr. Taryn Stejskal:** One, one other thing that I might ask is about structures of support that exist for that person. It, it may be true that they have a lot of support in their life or more often times it's true that there are not very many people that they feel like understand them and especially when a partner has been injured that can be so difficult for the spouse because all of a sudden that partner, that friend, that confidante that they had is no longer there and not only do they not have that support, they're going through one of the hardest things they're going to face as couple in their lives.

So I may ask questions like "who are you talking to, who understands you, who's supporting you right now, what's the smallest manageable change that you could make that would help support you during this time", and if a person can't talk to the person that had the injury because often times there's a great and very real fear that they're going to make that person feel worse about some of the changes then we try and find someone else either in their life or through a support group that would be able to understand their position and their thoughts and their feelings.