

## How I Re-Built Social Supports After My TBI

Source: BrainLine (Produced by Victoria Youcha and Brian King).

Video Link: <http://www.brainline.org/content/multimedia.php?id=2393>

**Kelli Gary:** How would I build social support that would help me to succeed after a brain injury? Well, I think first, of course, your family because even though your family may not understand, nine times out of ten they will still stick by you. So you have to have that. You gotta have somebody that may not understand the brain injury, but you know you can still rely on them. And that was my mother. She was a nurse, but she was a cardiovascular nurse. She didn't understand brain injury. She got a little bit what she needed from the doctors. But I knew my mother, regardless of what I did and trust me I've tried her nerve on many occasions, but I knew she would still stick by me.

The second thing that I did is that I aligned myself with people that knew about brain injury. So I tried to tap or get close to individuals that were successful, and they understood my plight from the fact that they understood about brain injury. So I reconnected with the therapist that I, you know, that were my therapists when I was in inpatient rehab. As a matter of fact, one is still my mentor to this very day. And I've learned from her. I talked to her. What should I do? I want to go and be an occupational therapist, so what are the steps that I should take? And she just talked to me and she understood, okay, she has a brain injury. She treated me so she knew. She said, "Well, so Kelli, you know, you have to look out for this. Think about this too. You know you have to study more than this. You might have to take on some extra study classes or what have you." So she gave me strategies and suggestions.

I connected with people at school in the program that I enrolled in that understood a little bit about brain injury. The people in the Disability Office that might have known a little bit about catastrophic injury and how that might affect my educational ability. So that's how I started to build my social support.

It was later, but this is very important to mention. Seven years after my injury, I went to my first brain injury support meeting. And by that time I was an occupational therapist. I was working at the VA. I was still living at home with my mom, but I thought I had overcome. I was like, I don't need a support group. But my old therapist encouraged me to go, and I attended the session through her coercion. But I wasn't as much into it. I was, like, I really don't need this. It wasn't until I went to a few sessions that I saw that I still had a lot of internal issues that I still hadn't dealt with emotionally. I still had, you know, problems with pushing myself because I felt like, you know, I needed to do too much to prove myself and just certain things that my support group members helped me with.

I've moved to three different cities since then. But I don't care where I go. Even if I'm not as active, I connect with every brain injury support group in the city that I'm in. So I connected when I moved to New York, I connected with the brain injury support group there and got involved and got to know people. I started to connect with friends that were positive. I mean, not individuals that had a hidden agenda that wanted to be around you for a certain reason. It took time to kind of shield those people, you know, kind of dig in and find out who those people were. But I started to pay more close attention to who my friends were based on what they are doing, where there were going, and what it is they would try to encourage me to do.

I tried to stay positive. I connected with those people that were positive in my church in my school those people that were doing the things that I wanted to do or the things that I was trying to do. And that was very important when I started to cut negative people out of my life, men included, friends, ex -- old friends that I thought were my friends that really weren't that's when I started to advance further. I have friends now that have been my friends for quite a while now that are PhDs, you know, that are, MDs. Those are the people that I try to align myself with. People that were being successful that were doing it

positively and that didn't want anything from me.