

Dr. Tedd Judd Talks About Understanding Behavior Changes With TBI

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Video Link: <http://www.brainline.org/content/multimedia.php?id=1414>

Dr. Tedd Judd: There are a lot of different ways that people understand, or try to understand, or think to themselves about what may be going on with some of the behavior changes we often see with traumatic brain injuries. And it's often handy to talk particularly about the example of impulsive anger. Maybe two examples will serve. The other one, the one I've mentioned before is the lack of initiation. And I picked these two because they're enduring problems that tend to be very disruptive to someone's return to their usual role, and they're very frequent problems. And they're also very treatable. They can be made better. There are lots of other problems too, but we'll pick those.

When we consider the different, I'm gonna talk from a neuropsychological perspective first, and then go on to some of the other cultural things that can go on. From a neuropsychological perspective, we can think of three major components of the personality of someone who's had a significant brain injury. There's the personality they already had before the injury, and an injury can happen to anybody so there's the full range. There are the reactions they have to that, and I put that in two parts, one is the reaction to the experience of the injury itself. So you might be really angry at the driver of the person who assaulted you, or you might feel really guilty because you were responsible for the accident, or you might have post-traumatic stress disorder from the ambulances coming, and from seeing the car coming at you at the last moment. All kinds of reactive things to the accident itself. Then there's also reaction to being disabled, and to what life is like now, the embarrassment, the fears of the future, the depression and so on. And there's a third component. So we've had personality prior to the injury, reactions to the injury, which we can understand from the point of view of people with intact brains, and the third is the changes in personality and emotions that result from injury to the brain itself.

Because the brain is the organ of emotion, it's the organ of personality. And so when it's changed, emotion and personality are changed. And its impulsive anger comes in large part from that third component, when we see it as a change, that the person who gets angry very suddenly, out of proportion to whatever the event is that's triggering the anger, and when they calm down suddenly afterwards, and when it's out of character, often people say why am I acting like this? I never used to be this way before. Please help me get rid of this anger. I know we're talking about the organic impulsive anger of brain injury. When it has those kinds of components, we, and when it doesn't serve a purpose very often, it doesn't get them anything. Anger serves a purpose in our lives much of the time, you know, it can get you something, and there are times when it's appropriate to get angry. But the impulsive anger of brain injury often doesn't get you anything. So those are some of the characteristics of that.

Most people, when they first see it, will tend to assume that either the person was like that before if they didn't know them well, and haven't seen it as a change, or perhaps that this is a reaction to either the injury, well they're angry because they were in an auto accident, or they're angry about being disabled. They'll see it as reactive to that. And that's a possibility, but much more often it's something else. Likewise, people will tend to see that lack of initiation, that dead battery in the car kind of experience as well they must be depressed, or they're unmotivated, or they don't really want to get better,

rather than seeing it as a brain problem. Those are common things, common interpretations to see in any culture.

In addition to those interpretations, we may also see people who put a spiritual interpretation on it, who see it as fate, or who see it as a punishment from God, or from the gods or the ancestral spirits, or various other sources for something that either they or someone in their family did, or one of their ancestors did. There are people who may see it as something that's part of their, a past life of their own that's responsible for, or who may not attribute it to anything in particular, just chance and life happens this way. And one of the things that sometimes we have a difficulty understanding from a Western perspective, even though we do it ourselves, is that many people hold several interpretations at the same time, and it's not contradictory for them. And actually that's true of us although we don't recognize it. I mean what caused the accident? Well what caused the accident was that the car ran off the road. But what caused the accident was that the road wasn't well marked. But what caused the accident was that it was rainy that night, or that the driver was drunk, or that we didn't have a good program of, that the person at the bar didn't recognize they were drunk and let them go out, or that we have a society such that blah blah blah. Causality can have many different levels, and they can all be operating. And that person themselves may say well this is a punishment for my terrible ways, and that may also be another level of explanation that likewise applies. And that's okay, and we can work with all of those, and sometimes you just pick the one that's going to serve the purpose now as best you can.