

**I Am What I
Am**

**LACK OF INSIGHT
and DENIAL**

I am what I was
and what I was is what
I will be.

ACCEPTANCE

I am what I am
and that is all that I
am.

GROWTH

I am what I am
but what I am
is not all that I will be.

CONTENT

I am.

AWARENESS → ACCEPTANCE → ADJUSTMENT → GROWTH → CONTENT After Brain Injury

Awareness and acceptance is not easy and takes time for an individual that has long-term changes after brain injury.

Sohlberg, 2007, wrote that an individual experiences multiple sources of unawareness after brain injury: 1) psychological denial and acceptance, 2) lack of insight due to no opportunity to experience using an ability in a challenging situation, 3) direct injury to brain structures responsible for awareness and/or thinking process. Gradual awareness of challenges is often more beneficial than immediate understanding of all problems all at once. Gradual awareness along with consistent identification of one's strengths helps preserve someone's self-esteem. Regardless, as one becomes aware of the various changes and challenges after brain injury, the suffering connected to these changes can sometimes be overwhelming.

In animals, stress is predominately present to survive and to care for other animals. Stress is experienced from lack of food, threats from predators, competition for resources, extreme temperature changes, physical injury, etc. However, in humans stress is significantly different. One of the primary contributors to stress is perception of self and perception of social status. Through awareness of significant changes in one's abilities, relationships, and functional participation, stress can often be overwhelming for someone months to years after a brain injury.

Along with stress, grief is common after someone has considerable long-term challenges after brain injury. Grief is defined as "keen mental suffering or distress over affliction or loss; sharp sorrow; painful regret." Grief can occur from other experiences besides death. When someone sees significant changes in his or her life – losses in abilities, relationships, employment, education, recreation – then an individual often has long-term grief and sometimes depression over a lost sense of self and loss of meaning. With this grief and stress, extensive suffering often exists.

Viktor Frankl witnessed extreme suffering in a German concentration camp in World War II. In 1952 he wrote in *Man's Search for Meaning* about the connection of meaning and suffering. Frankl wrote, "But not only creativeness and enjoyment are meaningful. If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete." An individual with brain injury can find meaning in suffering. Meaning, in that, he or she has moved forward from the previous day – from the previous moment in time. Meaning, in that, we all experience suffering, some more and some less, but it is one's own perception of the suffering and what one makes of it, that determines the sufferings fate upon us.

One important principal to growth after brain injury is to step away from comparison to the past and instead learn acceptance and mindfulness of the present moment. In 2014 Cheryl Sullivan, MD, wrote, "'We Are Not Who We Were, Be Who We Are.' No one is the same as they were a few years previously, as we constantly learn, adjust and move forward. In order to do that, we need to quit looking backward and wishing to return to a previous place. I think acceptance that we are different than before our BI, not necessarily worse, is a key thing to moving forward." Statements such as, "Be Who We Are" and "I am what I am," take consistent practice, meditation, and/or prayer to eventually be accepted.

One analogy that helps reestablish acceptance and adjustment and growth is to consider the self as a puzzle. As a puzzle, one's self has multiple pieces and each piece represents a component of the self (i.e., love to family, employment, values, etc.) giving meaning, representing who you are. After brain injury some pieces of the puzzle are damaged and have changed color from before. Other pieces represent your strengths; what you are good at; what you can continue to remain proud of. Being aware of strengths and using these strengths after brain injury is imperative. Setting rational, reachable goals for the changed pieces of the puzzle helps one grow from the present. Seeing the puzzle as a whole – awareness of strengths and acceptance of challenges -- can reestablish meaning and help someone step out of immense suffering.

Being content is another component of acceptance. The serenity prayer beautifully summarizes a struggle that individuals often face for years after brain injury, "God grant me the serenity to ACCEPT the things I cannot change, COURAGE to change the things I can; and WISDOM to know the difference." The concept of accepting what cannot be changed in the present moment helps one be content after brain injury.

It is possible that through the suffering experienced after brain injury, a person can experience growth. Once one accepts the growth experienced, day to day, one gradually stops comparing oneself to what one was before brain injury. As one changes perspective from grief and suffering to hope and gratitude--new and changed pieces of self can nourish as one grows into the future.