

## The garden party: meeting my former Traumatic Brain Injury rehabilitation inpatients

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It was a glorious sunny day as I headed for the TBI garden party. TBI. Traumatic brain injury. Some of my former rehabilitation inpatients, survivors of various types of brain trauma, were coming back to spend a riverside barbeque lunch with staff, friends and family.

The neuropsychologist was grilling the burgers, chatting with his former clients in mid-flip. The rehabilitation staff members wanted to find out how the clients were doing, what was going on in their lives, hungering to hear good news.

Juanita, victim of a car accident, noted that she went back to work after staying at home for about six months. She felt that her employers were taking advantage of their supposed goodwill. It took her about a year to get her truck driver's licence back, and she had found a better-paying job, in another town, scheduled to start the following week. Her marriage was doing fine, but the rules of engagement had changed. "Everyone was used to me doing whatever they asked. Now I think of myself first. It is taking them some time to get used to it." Money is always a problem but she is getting by.

Bob is so-so. A confirmed bachelor, he used to work in a retail chain head office. Now, his senior parents need to provide him with some physical and

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financial support, and he is struggling. He has mild hemiparesis, and his mother talks only about her son's physical losses. It is the cognitive problems that the rehabilitation staff were most concerned about – memory, concentration, calculation, multitasking. Mom cannot accept these losses just yet. Bob was an anxious guy before his motor vehicle accident, and now he is depressed too.

Samantha, a nursing home hairdresser, is very pleased; she is going to start working in two months. It took about a year and a half to get her motor vehicle licence back. She is divorced from her husband and living with her yoga instructor, a compassionate, warm individual. Her husband "couldn't cope with my personality change," and things were not going too well before the brain injury. If she had not had her parents to provide her with living accommodations in their basement after discharge, she did not know what she would have done. And she felt that if workers' compensation benefits had not provided her with funding for counselling and therapy in a private facility, her outcome would have been jeopardized.

Guy has not drunk since his weird low-sodium state created a form of brain meltdown. Important passages in the pons shut down (pontine myelinosis) and created a screaming agitated being from the netherworld. He now felt well, his thoughts were

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clear, and he was ready to return to the automobile body shop he had worked at. He had very little insight into his past alcoholism, and he did not go to AA as recommended.

The river flowed by. The desserts were delicious. The neuropsychologist packed up his spatula. I discussed with him some of my feelings and thoughts about the TBI garden party. I felt sad, far from uplifted. Many of my former patients were struggling or in some sort of turmoil. I wanted to lift them up, hold them and direct them through the doors of success and happiness. Such a strong rehabilitation effort had been initiated, but many pieces still lay strewn about, waiting to be connected, reattached, morphed into

things shinier and brighter. Why weren't these people fixed?

The neuropsychologist told me that I should have a little more patience. "Wait another year or 2 or 3 and you will really see the transformations, the changes, the miracles... and the heartbreaks. Have a little patience".

He's right. Healing does take time. And the injured brain takes even more time than a broken bone or torn skin. I'll wait. But in the meantime we'll all celebrate the transformations that are occurring daily, the hard-won victories over despair and the lessons learned. I will calm myself down and try to be there for my patients. In mind, in spirit, in support.