

Rebuilding a Personality After Brain Injury

Brian Stokert, MA

Speaking at the San Diego Brain Injury Foundation's general meeting on September 11, **Brian Stockert, M.A., a counselor in the Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Program at Mesa College**, in San Diego, described how the program helps to "rebuild a personality after brain injury." Brian is a marriage and family counselor who specializes in special education.



Brian Stockert, MA with survivor David Hoapili and Behavioral Optometrist, Dr. Brenda Anderson

The Mesa College ABI program is one of the very few post-acute, post-secondary programs for adult survivors of brain injury. Brian emphasized that the free ABI program is a support to psychotherapy, not a substitute for it.

Most rehabilitation programs focus on a medical model---the pathology of brain injury. The Mesa College program approaches recovery from a holistic perspective. It is based on a foundation that all people must have to feel that they have an identity and self-worth. This "psychosocial rehabilitation" is also crucial to recovery.

Brian first discussed the elements of thinking and coping. Our thinking and emotions aren't separate; they are an interconnected loop. The two basic emotions are love and fear. People's coping strategies differ, depending on whether they are coming more from love or from fear.

A related aspect of the program is the building blocks of recovery. First, in order to learn anything else, we must learn how to pay attention. Then the program focuses on concentration, then understanding, then memory. After these are worked on, the program focuses on organization, problem solving, and task completion.

Throughout this course, there is attention to the strategies we use to control our emotions. Learning how to do self-monitoring is an essential part of this. To reach our goals, we have to monitor our thinking every step of the way. Learning how to use coping skills helps to chase away negative emotions and fear, which can cloud our thinking.

The ABI program helps us to learn more about *who we are now* and to build on that, rather than focusing on *who we used to be*. It is a journey of discovering ourselves again. Who we are is rooted in who we were in the past, who we are now, and what we want to be in the future. Knowing our *values* and our *vision* gives us insight into our inner selves and how we relate to others.

Brian explained that our senses of ourselves can be compared to a house. The foundation of the house is your basic values. The walls, which are the support structures, are your skills. The roof, which is your shelter or security, is whether you matter or whether you belong. When you have a brain injury, it is like a house that has been in an earthquake. The foundation, walls, and roof of the house are cracked.

The first step is to deal with the grief of the loss. The next step is to take a good look at the house to see what is left and what needs work. Looking at the foundation (the values), we ask, “What matters now?” Looking at the walls, we ask, “What skills do I have now?” Looking at the roof, we ask, “Who am I?” and “How do I matter or belong?”

One important thing to notice is that when you are rebuilding a house, you don’t start with the walls; you start with the foundation. Focusing on the walls, your skills, won’t help until you have dealt with the foundation. To do this, it is necessary to look inward, not just outward. This is difficult for some survivors, but it is important. The old person, like the original house, didn’t go away, but it changed. When you have gone through this step, you have a firmer foundation. Then you can work on acquiring new skills. You can take the best of the old you and the best of the new you and build on them. You can put on a new roof by creating a new sense of who you are and how you matter and where you belong. This is where your vision comes in.

Brian said that it can take eighteen months to two years or longer to work on identity issues and create a new, integrated self-concept.

Another aspect of brain injury that the Mesa College ABI Program addresses is that individuals with injury to the right hemisphere and right frontal part of the brain may be unable to recognize the results of their injuries. *They don’t know what they don’t know.* This is called “*anosognosia*,” and it is not the same as denial, although it frequently is mistaken for denial.

In order to be able to learn about yourself, you need to be able to look at your self realistically. You need to be able to evaluate your performance, strengths, and challenges.

For more information about this program, call Brian Stockert at 619/584-6983.

Mesa College, Acquired Brain Injury Program San Diego, California

The Mesa College ABI program conducts neuropsychological testing to help students identify their functional problems, their strengths, and their challenges, in order to plan their programs most effectively. Injuries to the pre-frontal cortex of the brain also can impair social, interpersonal behavior. Injuries to the parietal lobes can cause problems with perceptual, sensory abilities. Injuries to other parts of the brain can impair linguistic ability. Different survivors have different types of impairment.

ABI Program counselors help students to increase their life skills, as well as their academic and work skills. They help teach them sensitivity to environmental and interpersonal cues. They provide group counseling with peers regarding goals and behaviors. Classes cover cognitive retraining, personal development, coping strategies, awareness, communication, academic skills, creativity, and vocational exploration. The aim of the program is to provide students with the tools they need to succeed in important areas of daily life, including interpersonal relationships, work, school, and the community. *Many members of the San Diego Brain Injury Foundation credit the Mesa College ABI program as being one of the most important factors in their recovery.*

The program is sponsored by the San Diego Community College District. Instructors include speech and language pathologists, rehabilitation counselors, recreation therapists, counselors, and paraprofessional support staff. The Spring and Fall semesters are 18 weeks, and the Summer session is 8 weeks.

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