



9 Things NOT to Say to Someone with a Brain Injury

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Brain injury is confusing to people who don't have one. It's natural to want to say something, to voice an opinion or offer advice, even when we don't understand.

And when you care for a loved one with a brain injury, it's easy to get burnt out and say things out of frustration.

Here are a few things you might find yourself saying that are probably not helpful:

1. You seem fine to me.

The invisible signs of a brain injury — memory and concentration problems, fatigue, insomnia, chronic pain, depression, or anxiety — these are sometimes more difficult to live with than visible disabilities. Research shows that having just a scar on the head can help a person with a brain injury feel validated and better understood. Your loved one may look normal, but shrugging off the invisible signs of brain injury is belittling. Consider this: a memory problem can be much more disabling than a limp.



2. Maybe you're just not trying hard enough (you're lazy).

Lazy is not the same as apathy (lack of interest, motivation, or emotion). Apathy is a disorder and common after a brain injury. Apathy can often get in the way of rehabilitation and recovery, so it's important to recognize and treat it. Certain prescription drugs have been shown to reduce apathy. Setting very specific goals might also help.

Do beware of problems that mimic apathy. Depression, fatigue, and chronic pain are common after a brain injury, and can look like (or be combined with) apathy. Side effects of some prescription drugs can also look like apathy. Try to discover the root of the problem, so that you can help advocate for proper treatment.

3. You're such a grump!

Irritability is one of the most common signs of a brain injury. Irritability could be the direct result of the brain injury, or a side effect of depression, anxiety, chronic pain, sleep disorders, or fatigue. Think of it as a biological grumpiness — it's not as if your loved one can get some air and come back in a better mood. It can come and go without reason.

It's hard to live with someone who is grumpy, moody, or angry all the time. Certain prescription drugs, supplements, changes in diet, or therapy that focuses on adjustment and coping skills can all help to reduce irritability.

4. How many times do I have to tell you?

It's frustrating to repeat yourself over and over, but almost everyone who has a brain injury will experience some memory problems. Instead of pointing out a deficit, try finding a solution. Make the task easier. Create a routine. Install a memo board

in the kitchen. Also, remember that language isn't always verbal. "I've already told you this" comes through loud and clear just by facial expression.

5. Do you have any idea how much I do for you?

Your loved one probably knows how much you do, and feels incredibly guilty about it. It's also possible that your loved one has no clue, and may never understand. This can be due to problems with awareness, memory, or apathy — all of which can be a direct result of a brain injury. You do need to unload your burden on someone, just let that someone be a good friend or a counselor.

6. Your problem is all the medications you take.

Prescription drugs can cause all kinds of side effects such as sluggishness, insomnia, memory problems, mania, sexual dysfunction, or weight gain — just to name a few. Someone with a brain injury is especially sensitive to these effects. But, if you blame everything on the effects of drugs, two things could happen. One, you might be encouraging your loved one to stop taking an important drug prematurely. Two, you might be overlooking a genuine sign of brain injury.

It's a good idea to regularly review prescription drugs with a doctor. Don't be afraid to ask about alternatives that might reduce side effects. At some point in recovery, it might very well be the right time to taper off a drug. But, you won't know this without regular follow-up.

7. Let me do that for you.

Independence and control are two of the most important things lost after a brain injury. Yes, it may be easier to do things for your loved one. Yes, it may be less frustrating. But, encouraging your loved one to do things on their own will help promote self-esteem, confidence, and quality of living. It can also help the brain recover faster.

Do make sure that the task isn't one that might put your loved one at genuine risk — such as driving too soon or managing medication when there are significant memory problems.

8. Try to think positively.

That's easier said than done for many people, and even harder for someone with a brain injury. Repetitive negative thinking is called rumination, and it can be common after a brain injury. Rumination is usually related to depression or anxiety, and so treating those problems may help break the negative thinking cycle.

Furthermore, if you tell someone to stop thinking about a certain negative thought, that thought will just be pushed further towards the front of the mind (literally, to the prefrontal cortex). Instead, find a task that is especially enjoyable for your loved one. It will help to distract from negative thinking, and release chemicals that promote more positive thoughts.

9. You're lucky to be alive.

This sounds like positive thinking, looking on the bright side of things. But be careful. A person with a brain injury is six times more likely to have suicidal thoughts than someone without a brain injury. Some may not feel very lucky to be alive. Instead of calling it "luck," talk about how strong, persistent, or heroic the person is for getting through their ordeal. Tell them that they're awesome.

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