

References

Sherer, M. (2005). Rehabilitation of impaired awareness. In W.M. High, A.M. Sander, MA Struchen and KA Hart (eds) *Rehabilitation for Traumatic Brain Injury*. New York: Oxford University Press, 31-46.

Fleming, JM, Strong, J. & Ashton, R. (1996). Self-awareness of deficits in adults with traumatic brain injury: How best to measure? *Brain Injury* 10, 1-15.

Owensworth, TL, McFarland, K., & Young RM (2002). The investigation of factors underlying deficits in self-awareness and self-regulation. *Brain Injury*, 16, 291-309.

Changes in Self Awareness

After a brain injury

This tip card helps therapists,
clinicians, families and caregivers...

- ✓ understand sources and types
of unawareness
- ✓ use strategies to lesson effects
of unawareness

Copyright © 2007, by Lash & Associates Publishing/Training Inc.

This material is copyrighted by Lash & Associates and can not be reproduced in any form without permission.

This tip card is part of a series on brain injury among children, adolescents and adults. For an order form with prices, contact Lash & Associates Tel. & Fax (919) 562-0015 or visit our web site www.lapublishing.com

For local information contact:

Written by
McKay Moore Sohlberg, Ph.D.



Published by

Lash & Associates Publishing/Training Inc.

708 Young Forest Drive, Wake Forest, NC 27587 (919) 562-0015

Lash & Associates Publishing/Training Inc.

Why is Self Awareness Important?

Self awareness is the ability to view ourselves somewhat objectively. It is also the ability to see ourselves from the perspective of other people. It allows us to use feedback from others as we develop our personal identity. We rely on self awareness when we...

- interact socially with others
- decide what situations or information to share
- make judgments about ourselves, and
- act in ways that insure our personal safety.

Brain injury can impair the critical capacity for self awareness. This can result in many problems for the individual who has been injured as well as the family. Research has shown that impaired self awareness often limits or slows down recovery. Individuals may not follow therapy recommendations or participate in supportive efforts because they do not recognize that they have a problem. Several studies have shown that employment outcomes for people with impaired self awareness are lower than for people who don't experience this difficulty after brain injury.

The caregivers of people with brain injury who have poor self awareness also tend to report greater levels of stress. Caregivers may find themselves arguing with a person displaying unawareness when this person does not see or acknowledge the problem. This can be especially challenging when it involves personal safety or danger. Understanding the nature of unawareness and becoming familiar with some basic management strategies may help those who care for or treat people with awareness deficits.

Sources of Unawareness

"My husband does not seem to be unhappy about his condition, but he lacks insight about what he can and cannot do. He will ask when he is going back to work or suggest that he could help me drive the kids when it seems so obvious that he does not have the physical or cognitive abilities to do these activities. When I explain that he cannot drive or work because of his brain injury, he does not object. He just doesn't get how his impairments affect his ability to do daily tasks..."

"When I remind my daughter to use her memory system she becomes extremely angry and yells at me that she doesn't need the book or any other type of help. She says she's totally fine now and that we just won't recognize that she's better..."

Impairments in self awareness are complex. They can arise from many different causes. The particular responses of individuals with impaired self awareness may differ widely from one another. Consider how the following possible sources of impairments in self awareness may contribute to inaccurate self judgments by an individual with a brain injury.

Source 1: Direct injury to brain structures responsible for awareness

Certain parts of the brain provide information to a person about how he or she is functioning. For example, the frontal brain regions behind the forehead are generally thought to significantly contribute to a person's insight and judgment. In some cases, people may be able to describe changes in their abilities, but they do not appreciate how the changes affect their lives. For example, a person may acknowledge having a severe memory impairment and difficulty learning new information, but feel able to successfully complete rigorous college courses.

Sometimes damage to a particular area of the brain causes a very specific type of unawareness. For example, damage to specific locations in the right brain hemisphere can cause unawareness of a person's left sided paralysis.

Source 2: Direct injury to structures responsible for thinking processes

Brain damage that affects memory or problem solving may also contribute to unawareness. If a person cannot remember information or does not fully understand it, that information cannot be used effectively. For example, impaired reasoning may result in a lack of understanding about the demands of a task. The person may attempt an activity that is unsafe because the person cannot anticipate possible consequences. Problems with judgment or awareness can stem from cognitive impairments.

Source 3: Psychological denial

Denial is sometimes confused with unawareness. Denial occurs when a person knows that he or she may have difficulties, but suppresses this information. The person may soften or outright deny evidence that reveals limitations. This is a psychological issue rather than the direct result of a brain injury. Psychological denial is an emotional defense mechanism that can spare a person the pain of recognizing difficulties and losses. To some degree it is normal and, in some cases, can be functional if it is not too extreme.

Source 4: No opportunity to experience changes

Occasionally an individual simply has not had the opportunity to experience the changes brought on by a brain injury. A cognitive impairment does not hurt like a broken leg. A person may think he or she is fine until experience shows otherwise. For example, a person may think that he can still drive because he has not yet tried it. Lack of such awareness may be apparent in the initial months following an injury while the person is gradually returning to routine activities and experiencing changes.

Often, more than one source contributes to changes in self awareness. A person may have some denial of deficits in addition to diminished self awareness due to brain damage. Awareness is complex and may take many different forms. A person may appear to have awareness or *knowledge* about personal strengths and limitations but be unable to *apply* that knowledge and make appropriate judgments about capabilities. Different awareness profiles often require different responses.

What Helps Unawareness?

The primary reason to work on awareness is to help people make better decisions. It is critical that efforts to increase a person's understanding of his or her abilities and disabilities are done in a manner that preserves self esteem. A healthy sense of self is critical for recovery.

The two primary methods to address impaired self awareness are education and structured feedback. Both require an interpersonal bond between the person deliver-

ing information or feedback and the individual with impaired self awareness. It is also important to have an environment that helps the person learn about strengths and weaknesses while still maintaining hope.

Education

Educational approaches to improve self awareness often involve teaching a person about the effects of brain injury. Education may begin with general information and then move to individualized education about a person's situation. Researchers have described systematic educational procedures such as...

- reviewing and helping interpret people's medical records
- jointly reading articles or books
- viewing media materials on relevant topics, or
- assigning generative activities (e.g., designing a presentation for a group on a brain injury topic).

Education is particularly helpful for people who have not had an opportunity to experience changes. It may be also useful for people who have unawareness of specific types of deficits. For example, education may be used to instruct an individual that her brain injury makes it difficult for her to recognize that her arm is paralyzed. This may be the first step in teaching a person to compensate for a deficit. When providing education, it is important to deliver information in a way that recognizes and provides accommodations for any cognitive impairments (e.g., use of graphics or the construction of a brain injury education notebook that a person can refer to as needed.)

Feedback

One of the most common forms of intervention for improving self-awareness is giving feedback. Therapists may use direct feedback when they are working with clients in sessions. They may also base their feedback on videotapes or observations of peers.

Sometimes indirect feedback is more productive for individuals whose awareness issues stem primarily from psychological denial. Indirect feedback may take the form of allowing people to self monitor their improvement on

tasks over time. For example, a person may keep a log of successes and challenges on a specific home or work task. Signs or evidence of improvement can help the client understand that earlier performance was impaired. It also helps the client see the gains that have been made over time. This can also help the person understand that future gains are still needed or possible.

The goal of feedback is to orient individuals to the aspects of their performance that they do not accurately perceive. It is very important in this process to balance feedback for problem areas with feedback for strengths.

Regardless of the approach used to help someone increase self awareness, the person in the role of therapist, coach or care provider needs to have a positive bond or connection with the individual. In order for a person to accept feedback, the person needs to feel that there is a partnership. The clinical term for this partnership is therapeutic alliance.

Communicating about Unawareness

It is helpful to remember that working on awareness is a *process*. There are few, if any, quick fixes. Unawareness represents a complex dynamic between emotional and cognitive functioning. Optimizing communication may improve opportunities to increase awareness.

Tips for therapists and caregivers...

- ✓ *Try to align yourself with the individual and avoid power struggles.*

No one likes to hear about personal shortcomings. Directly confronting or arguing about the presence of an impairment usually entrenches a person in the belief that there is no problem. This is particularly true for people with problems of denial. Try to find strengths and points of agreement and use encouraging language by positively restating difficulties and offering compromises.

Examples of positive restatements:

"I am impressed with your determination to be independent. I understand why you want to pursue this and your drive will help you get there. I'll try to not get in the way and only remind you about the big stuff."

"I don't want to work on things you don't need help with or hold you back. So let's figure out what pieces of this are easy and which are more difficult."

Examples of compromise:

"Would you be willing to try the medication for a month and if it doesn't seem to be working after that we can relook at things?"

"Would you be more comfortable if the job coach sat in the back instead of right next to you?"

✓ Preserve self esteem

Make sure attempts to increase a person's awareness strike a balance between confrontation and support.

- Make lists of attributes that were not affected by the brain injury
- Focus on strengths
- Reinforce progress
- Avoid only giving attention to problems

Conclusion

Awareness deficits can be very frustrating for families, support people and individuals with brain injury. People who have limited awareness of the type, extent or impact of their impairments may resist using accommodations or may make poor choices. Some may fight helpful suggestions because they feel others are being critical about issues that, in their view, do not exist. Other times, people may feel that the "help" of others restricts their freedom and daily activities. Finally, the person who has problems of awareness may appear to simply not care. This can be especially frustrating for a person's partners, whether they are family members, friends or business associates.

Helping people have a realistic appraisal of their abilities and challenges can be a complex process. This applies to both people who experience disability following brain injury and the people around them. Above all, addressing challenges of awareness requires a positive rapport and careful communication among all parties.