

Role Changes



When a family member has a serious injury or illness, other members of the family may take on extra duties. For example, if a father always did the yard work, but is now in the house with a broken leg, the oldest child may do the yard work instead.

These changes are often temporary, especially when Dad really likes yard work and is excited about doing it again.

Changes in family roles such as the one above, as well as others, occur after brain injury, but they may not be temporary. Let's say that Sarah has a brain injury. Sarah is married to Bob and they have two children, 8-year-old Sam and 12-year-old Cathy. Sara worked full time as a school teacher; Sam and Cathy usually rode home from school with Sara.

As a result of Sara's injury, she can no longer drive and will probably not be able to teach again. In addition, she used to take care of the bills, wash and iron the clothes, and keep the home running smoothly.

Now all those duties have shifted to Bob and the children.

Bob has to pay the bills, but there is less money because they no longer have Sara's salary. They also have large medical bills from the injury.

Cathy does much of the cooking now and cares for Sam after school. They both have had to stop music lessons and sports. Before her injury Sara gave a lot emotional support to her family. She was a good listener and a loving wife and mother. Now she seems unaware of much that goes on around her because she has to focus so hard on what she is trying to do at any given moment.

Even though the family members know Sara has problems due to her brain injury, they sometimes have feelings of anger, sorrow and frustration.

These issues are called "role changes." Role changes occur when one person takes on the duties of someone else. They can be very difficult when they involve a spouse or partner. Although each person in a partnership relationship has different roles, they work together as equals and often function as one. When one member of a couple gets injured, the other one becomes responsible for the physical and emotional support of the couple and may not get much in return because of the partner's injury.

It is hard for that feeling of equality to stay intact. Many people have stated that taking care of their partner feels more like a parent-child relationship instead of an adult-partner relationship.

Helping children understand that everyone needs to do their part to fill the gaps left by the injured parent is important. If possible, give them a list of tasks and let them choose the tasks they like the best (or hate the least!). Praise them for doing a good job. But remember they are children and need

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time to play, be with their friends, and not to feel as if their whole lives revolve around the injured person.

Sometimes family members put their lives on hold, waiting for things to return to the way they were before the injury. Even in the best of situations, life will never be the way it was before. Getting the family back into their routines will help maintain social and emotional support and bring enjoyment to life.

While role changes are often difficult, there may be several good things that happen as a result. Family members may learn to work together and be more supportive of each other. Children may develop confidence that comes with handling new roles. In fact, family members may find that things don't have to be like they were before, and that life can still be very enjoyable.

But it does take a little work and a lot of patience!

You can read more information about relationships after brain injury provided by Traumatic Brain Injury Model Systems at:

http://www.msctc.org/lib/docs/Factsheets/TBI_Couples_Relationships_and_TBI.pdf