



**BRAIN INJURY
ASSOCIATION
OF NEW JERSEY**

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Helpline: 1-800-669-4323

No Brain Injury is
Too Mild to Ignore,
or Too Severe to
Lose Hope

Brothers and Sisters

By Joanna Boyd

The common and natural focus of parents and educational professionals when an injury occurs is on the child with the injury. Often siblings are not considered during the crisis. The following are actual, unedited interviews of siblings, including their honest feelings and reactions about having a brother or sister who has sustained a traumatic brain injury. Association staff interviewed two individuals, whose names are changed here for privacy: a young woman we will call Ann, and a young man we will call Joe. We asked them each the same three questions:

Question 1: How did the injury occur? Please be sure to include the details about your age, your sibling's age and the date of injury. Ann: *My sister, her boyfriend and a cousin were drunk and riding a quad in the woods in West Virginia – no helmets. They hit a tree stump and she went flying eight feet up in the air and smacked a tree with the front of her head and then fell back down and hit the back of her head. She was 21 and I was 22 at the time. That was seven years ago.*

Joe: *Me and my brother were very close when we were young and it was his birthday. The party was beginning and my brother got excited and we both ran into the street. There were hedges that blocked the view and I remember, after he got hit, seeing him lying on the ground motionless. I remember seeing them put a white cloth on his head. I was four years old and it was my brother's fourth birthday. We are the same age for one month every year. That was sixteen years ago.*

Question 2: What are some of the ways the injury affected you within the first year? Five years later? Now?

Ann: *My sister was a heroin addict when she was injured. That first year there was a lot of anger, fear and crying - devastation. My sister was in a long coma – like two months that she didn't speak. She was so foreign to me. Her behavior was like an infant. We didn't know how hard it would be. She was an inpatient at rehab for about a year and a half. It's getting a little better now but now I have a lot of resentment toward her for holding back my mother because of the care giving. Because of the injury her [my sister's] personality is more intensified. She's become better to people outside of the family, but.... She is very giving and way too trusting. The trusting part is scary.*

Joe: *That first year a lot of what I remember is my imagination. I remember going to the hospital a lot. I remember the first time he came home for the week end. Five years later I was in grammar school with low self esteem, low confidence, but I was hanging with a whole lot of kids back then. When*



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*my brother was around it was embarrassing. When nobody else was around I wanted to hang out and take care of him. I'm ok now. Now I think about it and it's messed up. I wish it never happened. I'm stronger and better because of it. It helps me every day with day to day stuff. Stuff that other people think is a problem and get all agitated about, I know is nothing. But I get **** because they don't get it. It's like, don't get so stressed out because it's not as bad as it could be. So it helps and hurts.*

Question 3: Do you have concerns, feelings and/or expectations for the future that you would like to share?

Ann: My concerns for the future have lessened because she is becoming more of an adult. But.... because of the trusting issue, she could make another stupid mistake and we'd be back where we were seven years ago. My experience was the result of bad family life and drug use. I should have gotten counseling then. I should probably have some counseling now! How do you control the resentment?

Joe: There is always help somewhere but it's not always easy to find. It can be very stressful and you need somebody to set you up with the right people. There is always something new to deal with. It's hard to see the progress but every once in a while you look back and see where the person came from. The hardest part is that the person is not ever going to be who you want them to be. My concerns for the future are because my brother is younger than me and all the others will be gone one day and I will be the only one left to deal with it. It will be hard for me to manage my life and his.... That worry will always be around.

Certainly our two siblings, Ann and Joe, share their experiences with brain injury from very different perspectives because of their ages at the time of injury and the year of injury; however, it is clear that both siblings had the feelings of stress, frustration, sadness and guilt. As awareness increases about siblings' reactions and needs as a result of the brain injury, hopefully more attention will be paid to siblings issues. Brothers and sisters of children who sustain brain injuries can be immensely impacted.

For more information on the effects of brain injury on siblings please call the Family Helpline at 1-800-669-4323.

Joanna Boyd is the Public Education Coordinator for the Association and a member of the Children and Adolescents Committee.