

Detour

by Robin Murphy Davis

On a perfect May day, as my husband and I stopped at a traffic light, our Isuzu Trooper was rear-ended by a Toyota truck going approximately 25 miles per hour. I would never have imagined that the abrupt, but slight impact would send me on a journey through a health care and legal maze that would forever change my life.

My body was restrained by the seat and shoulder belts, but my head experienced the classic back and forth movement known as whiplash. I knew immediately that something was not right when my head and neck, particularly at the base of my skull, were in pain. Still, it was hard to believe anything was really wrong. I only agreed to be transported to the local hospital's emergency room when I had difficulty standing up and felt dizzy.

The x-rays and examination by the doctors showed no indication of injury. Released with a fistful of pain pills, I was instructed to go home and rest. A few days later, the headaches started. They would be constantly with me for years.

I saw a neurologist, and continued to see him for 18 months as my symptoms multiplied. Headaches, vision problems and an inability to sleep because of head and neck pain were the most obvious. But even scarier were the brain function symptoms. I couldn't remember simple words; I developed a stutter; I couldn't organize my thoughts or activities. Even cooking seemed beyond my capability.

I could only do one thing at a time, and often found myself distracted in the middle of the most simple task. My brain felt as if it had gone from a super computer to a slow, unmotivated file clerk whenever I tried to retrieve information. My energy, which previously had

seemed so endless, was now draining away. I was tired and listless all the time.

Normal brain sensors were absent, and a multitude of conflicting, and often irrational and inappropriate thoughts would come crashing into my consciousness. It was as if several conversations were going on simultaneously in my head. Sometimes, I couldn't distinguish between speaking with others and the voices in my head. I had some understanding how it must feel to be schizophrenic.

The head and neck pain caused me to clench my teeth at night. In a matter of months, I broke six teeth and had to have a special dental splint made to wear at night. Doctors diagnosed depression and gave me anti-depressants. Of course I was depressed! My life had been turned inside out and I was only getting worse.

Pain was with me constantly. I couldn't work for more than a short time, and so I wasn't able to earn much money. Socializing became impossible. I couldn't find the right words to carry on a simple conversation. And pain made me no fun to be around.

Driving was difficult. So much movement coming from so many directions made me fearful of another accident, and I could get lost going down familiar roads. Except for my many medical appointments, I became a recluse. My health and brain function continued to deteriorate.

Friends and family couldn't figure out what was happening to me. After all, this was a minor accident. I certainly couldn't explain it. Was this a life crisis? When you can't count on your brain and the ability to have that inner dialogue with yourself, you lose your anchor in life. Now I was really getting scared. I was losing me.

After a year and a half with no relief in sight, my physical therapist recommended I see a biofeedback/speech pathologist who was familiar with brain injuries. A major turning point, this woman was

able to determine through a series of tests that there was something wrong—and she gave it a name: **Mild Traumatic Brain Injury**. Quite a mouthful.

I was so relieved. I wasn't crazy. There really was an injury and it had a name. I also learned that the healing process would be a slow one, with a lot of work ahead. I faced a long battle, but now I knew my opponent.

Immediately, I began intensive brain re-training, teaching the brain to access the old information through new pathways. Biofeedback helped me manage my pain and learn relaxation techniques. Physical therapy concentrated on the head and neck areas that had taken the impact. Cranial-sacral work released the muscle tension and got the spinal fluid flowing again.

I also joined a support group, and heard how others were coping with the same problems, and learned I was not alone. So often, we protect even our loved ones from the grim reality of our physical and emotional pain. The support group was a place where I could honestly share.

Because there was such a lack of information available on MTBI, with my support group I wrote a booklet called Mild Traumatic Brain Injury: A Survivor's Handbook.

It was so important to me that others not languish for months or years not knowing what was wrong, but have the information in language that those of us with a brain injury could understand.

Head injuries are cumulative. My head had certainly taken its share of bangs, including a fall down a flight of stairs. But none of these had caused any lingering problems. It took a simple, 25 mph accident to tip the scales.

Brain injuries are life-changing. Injured people may look and even sound “normal.” But their lives have been turned upside down and it is possible they will never be able to function at pre-injury levels. The best recovery comes through correct diagnosis and appropriate treatment.

I will never be the same as I was before my injury. However, though my life is changed, I am more aware of my many blessings. I see the injury as a challenge, certainly, but also a great opportunity to help others.

Never give up hope. You can get better. The brain can heal itself. It is never on our timetable, but healing does occur. I’ve learned that it is important to treat ourselves with the same love and care we would give our dearest loved one.

10 Most Common Symptoms of MILD TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY

1. Headaches
2. Vision problems
3. Extreme fatigue
4. Sleep disturbance
5. Sensitivity to light and sound
6. Inability to organize thoughts and activities
7. Disorientation
8. Concentration and attention problems
9. Language and spelling difficulty
10. Loss of sense of self

From MTBI: A Survivor’s Handbook