

TBI NEWS & VIEWS



PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Charting a New Path: It's Not the Destination But the Journey That Counts



Matt enjoys a scenic view of Florence, Italy, with his mother, Marilyn.



Matt celebrates a holiday visit with family, including his sister, Jennifer, second from left.

"You never know what life will bring you, but don't let it bring you down," encourages Matt Torti who was born in 1970 in Belleville, N.J. While his first jobs were like those of many other teenage boys, he had dreams of one day becoming an astronaut. He pursued his interest in science at New Jersey Institute of Technology, where he graduated in 1997 and began a successful career in the computer and engineering fields. Matt was, in many ways, a typical Gen X-er, confident, professional, and independent with many friends, a girlfriend, and a loving family. In the spring of 2000, however, everything changed. Matt experienced a minor seizure.

Subsequent episodes were more severe, and in May, he had a grand mal seizure. Tests revealed that Matt had an *arteriovenous malformation* (AVM), a tangle of blood vessels that bypass normal brain tissue and abnormally connect to one another. After months of consultations and planning, he underwent surgery to repair the AVM in March 2001. During surgery, Matt suffered a heart attack and a stroke.

Matt woke up with both short-term and long-term memory loss including memories as far back as grade school. His recent memories begin with the summer of 2001, when he was an inpatient at Kessler Institute. He recalls his difficulties in dealing with his deficits including right-sided weakness that impacted his ability to walk and use his right arm, as well as issues with speech and word finding. Therapy helped him to regain mobility and improve his ability

to communicate. "I learned the importance of speaking up for myself and asking for help when I needed it," remembers Matt.

This marked the beginning of the next chapter in Matt's life. His girlfriend left, his fraternity brothers stayed, and his family's support never wavered. To reinforce the gains he made, Matt joined a gym and found new interests that included traveling and exploring foods from around the world. In fact, he recently spent three weeks touring Italy with family and friends. Most notably, he is admired and respected for his contributions to the Bergen and Essex County brain injury support groups, where he has been a member for over 15 years.

Matt's family has been steadfast in their love and support. His mother, Marilyn, has been his rock, providing her never-ending love while remaining respectful of his freedom. He also has a special relationship with his sister, Jennifer, and has no doubt the bond they share will remain strong in the years to come. Sadly, his dad passed away in December 2005. "I would not be here today if it were not for my family," says Matt.

Matt's bucket list is a long one, but he accepts his deficits and understands the need to take one day at a time. As each day passes, he continues on the journey he began so many years ago. For others recovering from brain injury, he shares this message—chart a new path, focus on making progress each day, and enjoy every step of the journey. ■

RESOURCE REFRESH

Kessler Institute's Cognitive Rehabilitation Services Rebuild Cognitive Skills, Restore Strength, and Maximize Independence

By Michele Hart, OTR/L

Recovering from a brain injury takes time, and individuals often require highly-specialized care to regain cognitive function. Kessler Institute's **Cognitive Rehabilitation Program (CRP)** is specifically designed to help individuals with brain injury rebuild thinking skills such as memory, attention, visual perception, organization, and communication. The ultimate goal of the CRP is to maximize your independence and help you return to activities at home, school, work, or in your community.



Michele Hart (left), occupational therapist in the Cognitive Rehabilitation Program at Kessler Saddle Brook, celebrates the art exhibit opening of CRP client and stroke survivor Marlene Hill.

Led by a neuropsychologist, the therapy team tailors the program to help you develop the skills and strategies that you need to rebuild your independence. For example, you may work on planning and following the steps to perform certain tasks, like preparing a new recipe, taking a family trip to the zoo, or paying monthly bills. You might also focus on hobbies or interests such as art, music, gardening projects, or building the adaptive skills to succeed in school. In addition, a Kessler occupational therapist will help provide the strategies to compensate for any other deficits and to manage any issues with neuro-fatigue, sleep cycles, or stress.

There are several different tracks within the CRP.

1. The **individual program** is suited for persons who may already be back to work or school but need training in strategies to help them overcome any cognitive difficulties that occur.
2. The **traditional group** program is designed for clients who need to enhance attention, focus, memory, and communication with the benefits of a group format.
3. The **functional skills group** is a full-day program with the goal of helping clients to apply learned strategies to a variety of hands-on and functional tasks as they prepare to return to work, school, or community activities.
4. The **fundamentals program** is for individuals with more severe cognitive impairments who require more individualized care, caregiver training, and basic cognitive skills.

If you are having problems with thinking skills and are interested in the CRP, the first step is to obtain a prescription from your doctor to undergo a neuropsychological evaluation at Kessler Institute. This evaluation will help to identify your specific cognitive strengths and challenges and will determine which CRP track is right for you. Once our case managers receive the neuropsychological evaluation, they will work with your insurance company to obtain authorization for you to begin treatment. ■

Learn more about the Cognitive Rehabilitation Services at Kessler Institute

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NURSE'S CORNER

Prioritizing Self-Care for the Caregiver

By Daryl Blewett, MSN, RN, CRRN, and Bonnie Tillman, BSN, RN, CRRN

On an airplane, the flight attendant gives safety instructions to all passengers in the event of an emergency. “Place the oxygen mask on yourself before assisting others.” Note the directive is to take care of your needs first so you then can effectively help others. Caring for yourself is a priority—and often the first thing that is forgotten. But when caregivers understand the importance of caring for themselves, their loved ones will benefit the most.

After a loved one sustains a brain injury, whether traumatic or non-traumatic, the entire family is affected. Caregivers may experience many different feelings such as burden, distress, anxiety, anger, or depression. It is important for caregivers to recognize and acknowledge these new feelings and seek support services that will help guide them through this life-altering event.

There are many types of services available for caregivers to find support including:

- In-home assistance (home health aides or personal care assistants)
- Respite care to provide a break for the caregiver
- Brain injury support groups
- Short-term counseling to help caregivers work through their feelings and adjust to the changes that being a caregiver brings

Many caregivers reach out to their communities—or their communities reach out to them—to create a support system of friends, family, and church groups to lighten the burden of caring for their loved ones. This can help to decrease any stress, anxiety, and burnout. ■



Bonnie Tillman

Caregivers need to take responsibility for their own personal wellbeing. Here are some self-care practices for caregivers:

- Use stress-reduction techniques, such as meditation, prayer, yoga, and Tai Chi
- Attend to your own healthcare needs
- Get proper rest and nutrition
- Exercise regularly, even in short 10-minute segments throughout the day
- Take time for yourself, such as reading a good book or taking a warm bath, without feeling guilty
- Seek and accept supportive counseling and attend support groups

- Identify and acknowledge your feelings—you have the right to experience all of them
- Change the negative ways you view situations

It is not selfish to pay attention to your own needs and desires when caring for your loved one. After all, in undertaking this new and often demanding role, you need to be healthy, rested, and ready to perform. By taking care of yourself, you will be able to provide the best care for your loved one.



Daryl Blewett

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New Traumatic Brain Injury Infocomics

The Model Systems Knowledge Translation Center has created a collection of *infocomics* related to living with a traumatic brain injury. Topics include emotional changes after TBI, sleep, headaches, and a three-part series titled "Understanding TBI." These infocomics can be found by visiting www.msktc.org/tbi/infocomics.

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