

brainwaves

Center for Traumatic Brain Injury Research at Kessler Foundation
Northern New Jersey Traumatic Brain Injury System



Raising awareness, inspiring hope

Traumatic brain injury survivor **Stacia Bissell** discusses her personal journey to help others overcome loss, build community, and embrace their new normal.

BY SAMANTHA WHITNEY

Stacia Bissell doesn't fully remember the bicycle accident that led to her injury. One minute, she was enjoying a ride through the hills near her home; the next, she was in the hospital with a fractured arm, cuts, bruises, and a traumatic brain injury (TBI). "Doctors said I sustained a 'moderate' injury, but it certainly didn't feel that way. I was an active, high-energy individual, a wife, mother, teacher, and school administrator ... and suddenly, I couldn't even recall what someone had just told me," Stacia says. "I was scared, frustrated, and angry, and wondered 'What do I do now?'"

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Listen Up!

Educator, advocate, and traumatic brain injury survivor Stacia Bissell, MEd, shares her journey of resilience and recovery in a powerful podcast, **"Look closer. My brain injury is invisible."** This talk, part of our quarterly Brainstorm series, was sponsored by the Northern New Jersey Traumatic Brain Injury System and Kessler Foundation.

Stacia also joined members of the Brain Injury Advisory Council for a panel discussion on **"Finding your voice: Strategies to cope with words that hurt."**

Access both presentations using the QR code below.



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Finding grace and understanding

Like many TBI survivors, Stacia struggled to overcome a range of physical, cognitive, and emotional challenges. She experienced chronic pain, fatigue, speech and memory issues, and tremendous self-doubt. Despite the well-meaning intentions of family and friends, she received a good deal of unhelpful advice, such as being told, “Just get up off the couch, get moving, and do more.” Stacia questioned if people understood the complexity of TBI or believed the reality of the difficulties she faced. Over time, Stacia discovered strength in the people who stayed by her side.



“TBI is invisible and non-discriminating. It can be about loss, shame, and missing yourself. But it is also about discovery, courage, and persistence while pioneering your own new direction.”

– Stacia Bissell

She explains that “while my ‘circle’ decreased, it increased in value.” This, she notes, empowered her to establish a healthier, more supportive environment for healing and personal growth. She also allowed herself time to mourn the enormous sense of loss that comes with TBI. And she says, “I learned to accept help with grace and give grace to others who have been impacted by my injury.” Yet to move forward, Stacia first needed to accept her injury and, she adds, “reestablish my ‘self.’”

Resilience is key

Stacia admits it’s been a long journey since her 2011 injury, during which her passion for learning and education helped sustain her. Today, she is a strong advocate and spokesperson for the TBI community. She has established support groups and serves as a mentor and coach for others living with TBI, helping them rebuild their lives, too.

Despite her progress, Stacia, like so many others, still deals with the long-term effects of her injury. She returned to teaching for a short time, but even with workplace accommodations, found it overwhelming. The experience led her to promote the importance of kindness, respect, and understanding for people with TBI.

By sharing her story, Stacia is inspiring others to embrace their own journey, build community, and find hope in the wake of a life-changing injury. 🌱

Samantha Whitney is a research assistant at Kessler Foundation.

Extending grace and gratitude

Through her storytelling, Stacia Bissell shares important insights and strategies on living well with TBI. She favors the practice of “grace” – being kind to yourself and others in order to allow for healing and growth. Here are ways to put grace into practice.

- Accept your injury.
- Resist the temptation to mask or minimize challenges.
- Surround yourself with a supportive community.
- Ask for help when needed; accept help when it’s offered.
- Say “yes” to new experiences.
- Embrace confidence, resilience, and gratitude.
- Understand that healing is a process.

And remember, says Stacia, “There is no expiration date on recovery.”

Get moving to better health and healing

BY KAYLA COUTTS, PT, DPT

Exercise is important in recovering physical health, cognitive strength, and emotional well-being following traumatic brain injury. Start by choosing an activity you enjoy!

For most people who have sustained a traumatic brain injury (TBI), exercise supports overall health and recovery. It is shown to improve cognition and promote **neuroplasticity**, the brain's ability to rewire itself following injury.

Exercise can also address balance, gait, and muscle weakness and minimize other complications, including fall risk. Furthermore, exercise can help improve sleep, reduce stress, and boost one's mood. It may also help control weight, blood pressure, diabetes, and other co-morbid conditions.

First things first

Before beginning any exercise regimen, it's important to check with your doctor. While certain

types of physical activity may help the healing process, others may be detrimental. Your doctor or a licensed physical therapist can guide you and monitor your progress.

Exercise options

There are two general types of exercise: aerobic and strength-based. Ideally, your routine should include both, if medically appropriate. Also known as cardio, aerobic activities – walking, cycling, dancing, and swimming – elevate your heart and breathing rates and increase endurance. Strength-based exercise – lifting weights, using resistance bands, or doing squats, pushups, and other bodyweight moves – builds muscle.

Now, the hard part

It's easy to talk about exercise, but far more difficult to get started. Here are four helpful tips:

- Choose an activity you enjoy so it will become a healthy habit.
- Start with light activities and increase to moderate, more vigorous levels when ready. (See below)
- Exercise with a family member or friend, or join an in-person or online class.
- Set realistic goals and track your progress toward better health. 📌

Kayla Coutts, PT, DPT, is a board-certified clinical specialist in neurologic physical therapy and clinical specialist on the brain injury unit at Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation, a Select Medical Hospital.

RPE	RATE OF PERCEIVED EXERTION
10	MAX EFFORT ACTIVITY Feels almost impossible to keep going. Completely out of breath, unable to talk. Cannot maintain for more than a very short time.
09	VERY HARD ACTIVITY Very difficult to maintain exercise intensity. Can barely breathe and speak only a few words.
7-8	VIGOROUS ACTIVITY Borderline uncomfortable. Short of breath, can speak a sentence.
4-6	MODERATE ACTIVITY Breathing heavily, can hold a short conversation. Still somewhat comfortable, but becoming noticeably more challenging.
2-3	LIGHT ACTIVITY Feels like you can maintain for hours. Easy to breathe and carry a conversation.
01	VERY LIGHT ACTIVITY Hardly any exertion, but more than sleeping, watching TV, etc.

How do you measure activity levels?

Monitoring how you feel during physical activity helps maintain a safe, healthy workout. The Rate of Perceived Exertion (RPE) scale is a standard tool that looks at breathing, heart rate, muscle fatigue, and sweating. Individuals with TBI are generally advised to begin with light activities, increase to moderate levels for 20 to 60 minutes, three to five times per week, and then consider a more vigorous regimen.¹ Your physician or physical therapist can guide you.

¹ Hassett L, Moseley AM, Harmer AR. Fitness training for cardiorespiratory conditioning after traumatic brain injury. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews. 2017(12).



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Help us help you! Join one of Kessler Foundation's research studies that are expanding the understanding and treatment of TBI. For more information, scan the code at left, or go to [Bit.ly/48Mpx6h](https://bit.ly/48Mpx6h).

Planning for the future

BY WASAYEF BSHARAT

The Planned Lifetime Assistance Network of New Jersey – PLAN | NJ – provides guidance, resources, and support to individuals with traumatic brain injury and their families.

Life after traumatic brain injury (TBI) presents significant challenges, and navigating short- and long-term needs can be overwhelming. PLAN | NJ, a non-profit agency based in Somerville, NJ, assists families throughout New Jersey with a range of essential services, including care coordination, guardianship, Social Security benefits, trusts, and other financial and legal matters.

How the program works

PLAN | NJ partners with individuals with TBI and their families to develop a personalized plan that covers needs, preferences, and future directives. This comprehensive plan is updated regularly to address any changing circumstances.

For example, through its trust administration offices, PLAN | NJ can serve as a trustee to effectively manage special needs trusts, which can help

pay for necessities and enhance a person's quality of life while preserving benefits eligibility.

Getting started

For more information, visit www.plannj.org or call 908.575.8300 to schedule a consultation. 📞

Wasayef Bsharat is an intern at Kessler Foundation.



PLAN | NJ
Planned Lifetime Assistance
Network of New Jersey