Building a Healthier Life After TBI

Transcript

00:00:00 [Music]

00:00:02 Announcer

Living with a traumatic brain injury can change many aspects of daily life, from how we communicate and care for our health to how we view ourselves and connect with others. Research helps us better understand these challenges, but personal stories often bring those experiences to life in ways that facts and statistics cannot.

In this issue of Brainwaves, we explore the power of sharing personal experiences, the role nutrition may play in supporting long-term health after brain injury, and resources that help people overcome communication challenges. We begin with the story of Cheryl Green, a brain injury survivor who has used creativity, storytelling, and advocacy to help others better understand life with disability.

00:00:48 [Music]

00:00:50 Hope

“I started making films to create a dialogue about the struggles, triumphs, and oddities of living with a brain injury,” says Cheryl Green. “The idea was to present stories of life with disability and accommodations with honesty and humor.”

Green began by keeping a journal, writing about her challenges and exploring feelings of isolation, loneliness, and frustration. She turned that into a short film, Cooking with Brain Injury. Her witty approach sheds light on some of the common cognitive, organizational, and emotional difficulties faced by individuals with TBI.

Through her work as a filmmaker, podcaster, and public speaker, Green continues to tell her story and that of others with disabilities to help create greater understanding and acceptance. “The mainstream audience typically

looks for inspiring stories where recovery is shown in a positive and motivating light," she explains. "In reality, our stories are far more complex and oftentimes unsettling … and we need to share them in our own voice and in our own way."

That led Green to co-direct the acclaimed documentary, Who Am I To Stop It. The film focuses on the lived experiences, not the medical issues, of three brain injury survivors who use art, poetry, music, and painting to express their purpose, connection, anger, and hope.

"It's important for people with TBI to find an outlet through which they can share their story," says Green, who holds master's degrees in theater and in speech-language pathology. She suggests writing, journaling, singing, drawing, or painting as creative ways for people to communicate their feelings to family and friends. "It can be a cathartic experience," she notes. "Art can bridge the gap between isolation and transformation."

Green also produces a podcast, called Pigeonhole, that presents honest, heartfelt stories by, for, and about people with disabilities and their multi-faceted lives.

To further support her recovery and mental health, Green keeps moving: taking long walks, biking, and doing physical therapy. She also volunteers at Sunflower Farms, where she tends to the chickens and gathers the eggs that, along with the farm's produce, are donated to local food pantries.

Green encourages all people with disabilities to find their voice, tap into their creativity, and tell their own unique story.

To learn more about the importance of creative outlets and the shared voices of people with disabilities, visit Green's website whoamitostopit.com.

Personal stories help people connect, educate others, and better understand themselves. Cheryl Green's experiences also highlight a larger truth: sharing our stories can benefit both the storyteller and the listener. Here's a closer look at why stories are so powerful.

00:03:42 [Music]

00:03:43 Matthew
Why stories are powerful

We all have stories. They are meaningful, impactful, and beneficial to our overall health and well-being. As Cheryl Green notes, presenting our stories allows us to:

- Feel pride in sharing something amazing about ourselves
- Correct misunderstandings
- Point out where someone underestimates what we can do
- Explain when someone thinks we can do more than we can
- Give a window into our life-world, that is, our experiences

Mariana Costa is an intern in the Center for Traumatic Brain Injury Research at Kessler Foundation.

The choices we make every day can also shape our health and well-being. One area receiving increased attention from researchers is nutrition and the role it may play in supporting recovery and long-term health after traumatic brain injury.

00:03:49 [Music]

00:04:41 Jessica

A healthy diet may help lower the risk of long-term complications following traumatic brain injury.

Nutrition plays a critical role in recovery after a traumatic brain injury. A well-balanced diet supports healing and may help to prevent or manage conditions that often develop over time, notably cardiovascular disease. While individuals with a history of TBI are at a much greater risk for heart disease than the general population, nutritional choices can significantly influence their overall health and quality of life.

A new look at diet Palak Patel, MD, Brain Injury Fellow, Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation, is investigating how different eating patterns may help reduce health risks after TBI. Her research shows that diets rich in whole, minimally processed foods, such as fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, seeds, and healthy fats, are linked to better heart health and lower rates of chronic disease.

In particular, Mediterranean and DASH-style diets are associated with improvements in blood pressure, cholesterol, inflammation, and risk of heart disease or stroke.

Plant-based diets may also offer benefits for weight control and cardiovascular health, though evidence on brain-related outcomes is still limited. Other approaches, such as ketogenic diets and intermittent fasting, have shown some promise in laboratory and small human studies, but the evidence is not yet strong enough to support widespread use in people with TBI, especially for long-term use.

Improving outcomes Existing evidence suggests that healthy eating patterns may be a valuable tool in helping to lower cardiovascular risk and support long-term brain health, although more studies focused specifically on people with TBI are needed.

Communication is another important part of living well after brain injury. For some individuals, expressing

thoughts and feelings can become especially challenging because of aphasia. The next story explains what aphasia is and highlights a resource that helps people stay connected and engaged.

00:07:00 [Music]

00:07:02 Bill
Aphasia is a language disorder that leads to communication challenges in up to one- third of brain injury survivors.

Following a brain injury, many individuals develop aphasia, a disorder that causes difficulty speaking, reading, writing, and understanding language. People with aphasia often struggle to express their thoughts and feelings and may become easily frustrated. It's important to note, however, that aphasia does not affect or reflect intelligence. A person's cognitive abilities, memories, personality, and sense of self remain intact, despite communication difficulties.

Finding a new normal Living with aphasia is an adjustment for individuals and their families. But maintaining communication is critical to their overall health and well-being. Conversations are likely to be different than before as meaningful responses may now come through a word, gesture, facial expression, written note, or picture. What matters most is creating space for the person to participate, feel understood, and be included in everyday exchanges.

Resource to the rescue The Adler Aphasia Center provides a range of programs and support services for people with aphasia and their families. Using the Life Participation Approach to Aphasia (LPAA) clinical philosophy, the center focuses on building communication and community, along with confidence, social connections, and engagement. At its core, the center's mission reflects a simple truth: aphasia may change how someone communicates, but it does not change the importance of their voice.

00:08:52 [Music]

00:10:16 Announcer

Thank you for listening to this audio summary of Brainwaves.

In this issue, we explored how creative storytelling can build understanding and confidence, how healthy eating patterns may support long-term health after traumatic brain injury, and how resources for aphasia help people stay connected and engaged in their communities.

These stories reflect the mission of Brainwaves: sharing research, insights, and practical resources that help individuals living with brain injury, along with their families and caregivers, navigate everyday life.

To learn more, access additional resources, and read the full newsletter, visit Kessler Foundation and explore the latest issue of Brainwaves. Websites mentioned in this podcast can be found in the program notes.

00:09:42 [Music]