

Awareness and Insight

Some people have a lack of awareness or insight into the problems resulting from the brain injury. Changes or limitations since the brain injury that are obvious to family members may not be obvious to the person with the injury. The person may have some awareness, but it may be limited.

It may seem like the person is "denying" that any problems exist or underestimating the severity of these problems. This occurs mostly because the injury may have affected the part of the brain (the frontal lobes) that controls self-awareness.

This does not happen because the person is intentionally trying to be stubborn or difficult. It is also not a problem with psychological "denial."

When lack of awareness/insight is an issue, a person may not show normal reactions when making a mistake (like saying, "Oh Darn!") or may not even realize that a mistake was made. The person thinks that he is fine and that anything he does is also fine. Because of this, the person may refuse help from caregivers.

A person with this problem may set unrealistic goals and expect to keep the same lifestyle/goals as before the injury. This lack of awareness can pose a threat to a person's safety.

Driving, using heavy machinery, being left alone and climbing tall ladders are all examples of activities that pose safety risks after a brain injury. Please follow the safety guidelines / precautions explained by the treatment team.

Example 1

Frank had a traumatic injury to the right side of his brain. He has severe left sided weakness that affects his legs and arms. He also has some trouble with balance. Frank needs a wheelchair to get around and one person to assist him to get on and off the toilet. He cannot be left alone in the bathroom because he has fallen twice when he has tried to go alone.

Frank has a new caregiver today. He tells the nurse he can get on the toilet by himself and needs no help. He says, "I can't understand what all the fuss is about in the bathroom. I'm fine and I can do this myself." The nurse asks him about his recent fall and Frank replies, "Oh, I didn't fall. I just lost my balance. Everyone is overreacting. I'm fine." Frank has a problem with awareness.

Ways to Help

Remember, SAFETY FIRST!

- Keep surroundings safe and free of potential hazards.
- Keep keys out of reach.
- Keep dangerous machinery locked up.

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Consider safety issues in the kitchen (knives, stove, etc.).

Keep firearms out of reach and out of sight.

Avoid confrontation. Do not argue or try to reason. Instead, offer two safe choices, such as:

- "Would you like to use the urinal in bed or would you like for me to assist you to the bathroom?"
- "I would really appreciate your help in the yard. Would you like to pull the weeds or plant the border grass?" (instead of driving the lawn tractor)

When giving feedback, praise efforts first, then offer suggestions for improvements, such as: "You made a great effort this time. Here is one thing I have found really helpful when getting out of the bed. Maybe we can try it next time."

Never leave a person with decreased awareness/insight alone until cleared by the doctor and/or rehabilitation team. Keep in mind that safety issues may reappear in new environments for an otherwise safe patient.

Alert other caregivers and emergency personnel of the person's limitations, and help them understand how to promote safety.

Observe the person for improvements. The person may be ready to start practicing to be more independent. Speak with the doctor if you think it is time to reevaluate the situation.