

# Rebuilding Relationships A Guide for Survivors and Family



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**an injured person's  
point of view \_**

**"I lost my friends because they didn't  
know how to deal with my injury.  
Neither did I."**

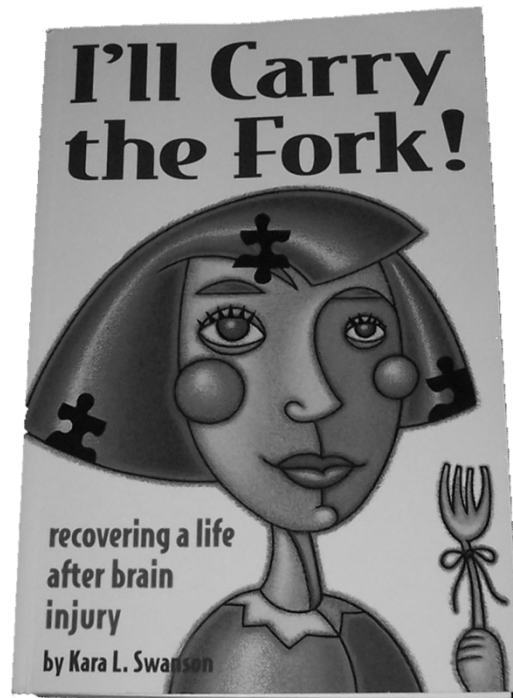
from the VA statewide community based needs assessment



Photo by Kim Scholtz

"I wrote this book because the understanding of traumatic brain injury is limited even among medical professionals, much less the average 'civilian.' Every year, thousands of people unknowingly bid farewell to the lives they have known. Whether the diagnosis is termed severe concussion or traumatic brain injury or closed head injury, many survivors are finding out that sometimes when your life ends, you don't actually die."

Kara L. Swanson



## Catching the Bus

The curious thing about the auto accident that ended my life was that I lived through it. On January 31, 1996, Death sneaked through a red light disguised as a minivan going 50 miles an hour.

Kara L. Swanson

## Catching the Bus

‘Course, nobody told me that when they finished pulling me out of my car, they were putting me right on the bus. That’s what I call the process of recovering from traumatic brain injury: “getting on the bus.”

Kara L. Swanson

## Catching the Bus

It’s a good thing they strapped me down and fastened my head to a board. Had I understood even a little of the journey that had just begun, I would have hit the ground running.

Kara L. Swanson

...and others didn't understand. How could they. They couldn't see the hundred and one things I was doing behind the scenes to present myself as normal. I looked the same (except for the extra poundage).

Kara L. Swanson



## Postinjury Relationship Changes

**Loss of good relationships with friends, families, and coworkers may be one of the greatest casualties of injury.**

- Best friends may disappear and family members may seem distant or unhelpful.
- Many survivors describe feeling lonely, isolated, and misunderstood.

## **Loneliness and Other Common Feelings after Brain Injury**

- lonely
- neglected
- abandoned
- ignored
- isolated
- rejected
- disrespected
- disliked
- unworthy
- different
- unsupported
- misunderstood

### **Understanding is Important**

**No doubt that brain injury causes medical and physical problems.**

- Brain injury also changes the way you think, feel, and act toward others.
- Understanding how brain injury has affected the way you feel and act is an important first step.

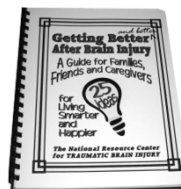
There are two frontiers to recovery from any traumatic injury. The emotional damage must be dealt with as diligently as the physical damage. Each area has the ability to strengthen or weaken the other.

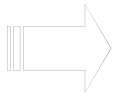
Kara L. Swanson

## Emotional and Physical Recovery are Two Different Things

- ▶ Many different problems develop after brain injury.
- ▶ You want each of them to get better and go away.
- ▶ Recovery falls into at least three categories:

1. emotional
2. physical
3. cognitive





## Understanding is Important

**By better understanding your situation, you can learn to –**

- improve old relationships
- develop new relationships
- feel better about yourself and your life

Have you found yourself saying ...

- “What happened to all the friends who came to visit me in the hospital?”
- “People seem to avoid me.”
- “My wife threatens to leave me at least twice a week.”



## Have you found yourself saying ...

- “I wonder why no one returns my calls.”
- “Seems like everyone at work has lost my phone number.”
- “Other people don’t want to be around me.”



## Have you found yourself saying ...

- “Nobody has any idea what I’m going through.”
- “I can’t relate to other people. It’s easier to be by myself.”
- “Seems like nobody wants to talk to me.”





## How Are You Treating Other People?

- Are you thinking a lot about how others treat you?
- Have you noticed that friends, family members, and co-workers are treating you differently?

## Relationships Are A Two-Way Street



- Just as important is thinking about “How you treat other people”
- The way you act toward other people affects the way they treat you.

I got angry at nothing. One night something irked me and I tore down the wallpaper in my living room. I interrupted people. They could tell me they just found the cure for cancer and I would cut them off and talk about how pretty the car next to us was.

Kara L. Swanson

## The “Are You Pushing Other People Away” Questionnaire

**Are you pushing others away by.....**

- focusing on what’s wrong in your life and the world
- not listening when others speak, interrupting or talking too much.
- arguing or disagreeing
- not thinking about other people’s needs or feelings



## The “Are You Pushing Other People Away” Questionnaire

### Are you pushing others away by.....

- talking only about yourself
- asking people very personal questions
- talking mostly about your brain injury and how your life has changed for the worse
- repeatedly rejecting other’s advice, suggestions, or offers of help



## The “Are You Pushing Other People Away” Questionnaire

### Are you pushing others away by.....

- touching people without asking if it’s okay or standing too near them
- talking without thinking or saying things that hurt other peoples’ feelings
- not using good hygiene



One of the most important steps in recovering from any traumatic event is realizing that you need help – that you can't always make it by yourself – and finding the strength to seek it out.

Kara L. Swanson

### Why Many Survivors Feel Lonely Even When Around Family and Friends

- ⇒ Communication problems can make relating to other people very difficult.
- ⇒ After injury, some survivors have trouble talking to other people or understanding what others are saying.



The inability to organize my thoughts confounded me. I had some idea of what I wanted to say, but I couldn't keep other ideas from popping in here and there, and my first few attempts were a tangled mess.... It was like trying to get gum out of my hair with mittens.

Kara L. Swanson

## Why Many Survivors Feel Lonely Even When Around Family and Friends

- ⇒ Many survivors worry about being different or less capable than others.
- ⇒ Feeling self-conscious can make it difficult to be around other people or seek new relationships.



## Why Many Survivors Feel Lonely Even When Around Family and Friends

- ⇒ Pain and physical problems may make it harder to travel or visit other people.
- ⇒ Many survivors describe feeling nervous about being around other people.
- ⇒ Some survivors may be afraid of being hurt or rejected by others.

June 4, 1996. I was standing in line at Target. All of a sudden, I was furious with the young woman behind the register. I just wanted to KILL her! I don't know why. Diana ended up taking me home. I'm so embarrassed.

Kara L. Swanson

## Why Many Survivors Feel Lonely Even When Around Family and Friends

- ⇒ Many survivors notice being irritable.
- ⇒ Some notice that they do or say things they regret later on.
- ⇒ People you know may avoid you because they are worried about what you might say or do.

My family and friends didn't know anything about head injury. We didn't know how to interpret what we were seeing.

Kara L. Swanson

## Why Many Survivors Feel Lonely Even When Around Family and Friends

**Your friends and family may feel uncomfortable because they don't know -**

- ⇒ what to do or say
- ⇒ how to act
- ⇒ how to help



It wasn't what people said, mind you. It was what people didn't say that scared me. I would sometimes catch them trading "those looks."

Kara L. Swanson



## Why Many Survivors Feel Lonely Even When Around Family and Friends

- ⇒ People generally make friends through work or being involved in social or recreational activities.
- ⇒ After injury many survivors stop working and may not be involved in sports, church or other activities.
- ⇒ People lose contact with co-workers and friends.

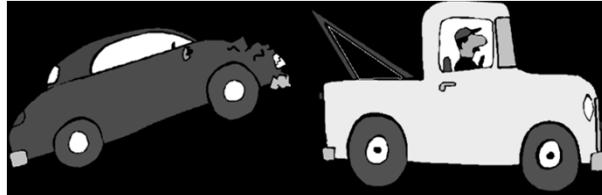
## Why Many Survivors Feel Lonely Even When Around Family and Friends

- ⇒ Fatigue and loss of energy are common after injury.
- ⇒ Many say they don't have the energy to enjoy spending time with friends and family.



## Why Many Survivors Feel Lonely Even When Around Family and Friends

- ⇒ Many survivors are not able to drive or work.
- ⇒ Lack of transportation and money can prevent you from joining others involved in activities.



## Building Lasting Relationships

- Ask trusted friends for their ideas about how you can be helpful.
- Helping, caring for, and reaching out to other people is a good way to show others that you are the kind of person that they want to be around.

## Building Lasting Relationships

### Be a kind and considerate person.

- Be polite.
- Before you act, think about how others will be affected by what you do.
- Try to do things that will help other people feel good about you and themselves.

## Can I make and keep relationships if I don't have much money?

What you should be thinking....

Being kind doesn't necessarily mean spending lots of money

- We've made a list of ideas about how you can be nice to other people.
- Try out the ideas.
- Be creative, add and try out some of your own ideas.



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## Be Kind to Others

- Don't be shy about complimenting others. Think about what you like about other people and tell them.
- Pick flowers or vegetables from your garden and give them to others.
- Share a comic strip, story, joke, magazine article or book.
- Hold the door or elevator for someone.
- If someone drops something, pick it up for them.



VCU Health System  
MCV Hospitals and Clinics

## Be Kind to Others

- Tell someone who helps you how much you appreciate them.
- Offer to baby sit for someone, take care of a pet, or help with their chores.
- Buy someone a snack, coffee, tea, or soda.
- Bake someone cookies, brownies, or a cake.
- Make a meal for someone.



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## Be Kind to Others

- Listen carefully, patiently, and politely when other people are talking.
- Offer to keep someone company.
- Write someone a kind note, letter, or email.
- Draw someone a picture or make and send a friendly card by personal delivery or (e)mail.
- Mow your neighbors lawn, rake their leaves, or shovel their walk.



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VCU Hospitals and Clinics

## Be Kind to Others

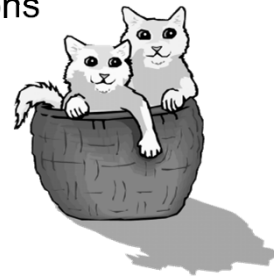
- When you find a helpful web site, share the address with others.
- Offer a ride to a friend or family member.
- Offer to help someone carry their bags at the store.
- On a nice day, invite a friend for a walk or visit to the park.
- Drop a few coins in someone's parking meter if the time has run out.
- Donate blood.



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## Be Kind to Others

- Share a stick of gum from every pack you buy.
- Help a friend or neighbor move in or out.
- Donate clothes, books, or other things you don't use to someone in need.
- Give family or friends home-make coupons they can can in for favors from you.
- Adopt a pet from a shelter.



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## Be Kind to Others

- Offer to help someone organize or clean their house, basement, or garage.
- Offer to pick up your neighbor's mail and newspaper when they go away, and water their plants.
- Volunteer your time to your church, local library, Red Cross, or other community organization.
- Smile and say, "Hello" to people.



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## **Building Lasting Relationships**

**Work on being a likeable person.**

- Be a good friend, the kind of person that others like to be around.
- Ask and talk to others about their lives, interests, and well-being – and listen carefully to what they say.

## **Building Lasting Relationships**

**Learn to communicate in positive and helpful ways.**

- Avoid being too quick to share negative thoughts and feelings with others.
- Work at finding and talking about the good things in your life and the world around you.

## **Building Lasting Relationships**

**Be careful not to be overcome by your problems and the challenges you face.**

- Look for the good in other people as well as yourself.
- Remember that most people have a good heart and enjoy helping others.

## **Building Lasting Relationships**

**Before you speak, think carefully about what you want to say and how others might react.**

- Try to say things in a way that brings a positive reaction.
- Avoid confrontation and try to be agreeable.



## Building Lasting Relationships

**After brain injury you may feel overwhelmed by the changes in yourself and your life.**

- You might have trouble not thinking about your injury and the challenges you face.
- Try to think of others at least as much as you think of yourself.
- Thinking about others is really a skill. The more you practice the better you get.

.... the dogs were just happy I'm home.... They've been sitting here all morning smiling and wagging their tails.

Kara L. Swanson

## Building Lasting Relationships

### Adopt a pet.

- There are many pets out there without anyone to take care of them.
- You can offer them a loving home and find yourself a grateful companion in return.



## Building Lasting Relationships

### Talk to and spend time with people who care about you.

- Write, call, or email your family and friends even if you're just saying "Hi."



### Show a commitment to helping yourself.

- People will be more supportive and respectful if you do.

## Building Lasting Relationships

### Do volunteer work.

- Churches, schools, hospitals, and libraries offer good opportunities.
- By helping others, you are likely to meet people with a kind and giving heart.

## Building Lasting Relationships

### Keep an open mind when thinking about what you can and want to do.

- Look for new activities or hobbies to make friends.
- Join a support group, club, fitness center, or sports team.



## **Building Lasting Relationships**

**Don't lose track of your faith.**

- You have a good chance of meeting understanding and kind-hearted people at your house of worship.



## **Building Lasting Relationships**

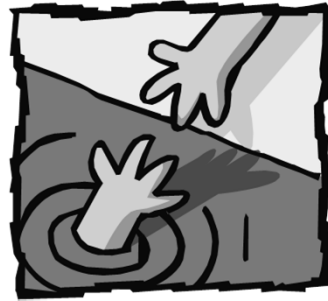
**Learn about brain injury, community resources, and recovery.**

- Contact the local brain injury association to find out about support groups and other resources available in your area.

## Building Lasting Relationships

To help you get started in building better relationships

--- try to do at least one good thing for someone else every single day



## Fundamentals for Success

- ➔ create or find a supportive environment
- ➔ live according to your good values
- ➔ define success in your own terms



## Fundamentals for Success



- ⇒ recognize the benefits of hope and a positive attitude
- ⇒ be patient and persistent
- ⇒ get better by learning and trying

Our ultimate wish, our ultimate vision is that no one ever has to face recovery from a brain injury. For now, the wish and the vision are simply that no one has to face it alone.

Kara L. Swanson

We don't know what tomorrow will bring. We have no idea what waits around the corner, whispering our name in the darkness. We can stay in our homes and refuse to be injured, refuse to be changed, refuse to be damaged.

Kara L. Swanson

Or we can live, even if unexpected circumstances throw us sinking curve balls. We can stop thinking we're untouchable. And we can surround ourselves with quality people who will help us and whom we will help, should fate put either of us on board the bus at its next stop.

Kara L. Swanson

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