

The SOLUTION source

Thunder Bay Counselling Centre Newsletter
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For You & Your Family

Summer 2012

Automobile Accidents

Welcome to our Summer 2012 Newsletter where we focus on the emotional impact of car accidents. We see reports on the news and in our daily newspapers and are horrified at the shock of the violence, the pain and the suffering, but have you ever thought about what happens to the victims of these accidents days, weeks and even years down the road?

What is Happening to Me?

Author, counsellor and vehicle accident victim himself, Mark Logan invites us to consider the following scenario:

"Imagine that you are happily going about your day, driving down a highway you are quite familiar with, then the car coming towards you seems to swerve all over the highway, you have nowhere to go. Immediately the body's natural defence mechanisms kick in. Adrenaline is released, breathing and blood pressure increases, there is an immediate heightened state of awareness, blood rushes from the peripheries to enhance the function of and protect vital organs such as the brain, heart, kidneys and lungs. Then just at the point of impact you freeze up, your muscles and joints lock up, as the fear for your life becomes a reality, then... you have just become another road statistic. In your drowsy pained state, you find yourself looking around the scene. Your body is broken and your first thought is "is everyone ok?".



Immediately on impact, you and/or other persons at the scene will be suffering from psychological and physical trauma.

A Personal Reflection

I witnessed a car accident last night. I was out for a run with my son on his bike and as we came towards a junction a car pulled out into the path of another one which was doing around 30mph and there was a large thud, lots of steam followed by the inevitable hissing of brakes as both cars stopped.

I was involved in a car accident when I was practising when someone drove into the back of my car and both my wife and I were injured. However, seeing this accident last night reminded me again first hand of the emotional impact of a car accident.

The circumstances of the accident were pretty much as I described above. One car was at a T junction waiting to turn right. I was running up the same road as this light blue car, a black car was coming along the main road and the light blue car pulled out into the path of the black car causing the collision. I sprinted to be the first on the scene and checked that both drivers were OK. The light blue car also had a passenger.



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Anger and Shock

The first emotion was anger. The driver and passenger jumped out of their car and appeared quite confrontational. They claimed that the driver of the black car had been indicating to turn left into the road that they were coming out of which is why they pulled out. They were naturally cross, frustrated and annoyed. The girl in the black car at this point was just sitting in shock in her car, which was now blocking the main road. I went to help her out (and to prevent the other driver getting too close to her) as I was worried with emotions running high, the scene might deteriorate rapidly.

Bewilderment

Now this is my emotion here. Within three minutes of the accident someone that was being held up started beeping their horn. Unbelievable but true. This person was not concerned whether these people were injured, just that they had to get home for their fish and chips or whatever else their hurry was!

Shock

The next emotion by those involved was simply shock. Once they had spoken (with the light blue car driver saying the black car had been indicating a turn which is why she pulled out and the other driver saying that her indicator had flicked on as she turned it off from pulling out of another side road just 50 metres away, but she had quickly flicked it off) they both retreated to near their cars and just looked shocked and bewildered.

Practicality

Once the shock subsided slightly the next thought was practicality. I was concerned about clearing the road to ensure another accident was not caused as this was a busy junction at around 6:30pm. The black car had roadside assistance but the light blue one did not. Light blue then realized that she was only covered with third party insurance and was now scared that her pride and joy, probably her first car, might be ruined.

Tears

Tears quickly followed for light blue, while black car was really in quite a bit of shock. I kept checking on her as she was definitely the more shaken up by the accident (and light blue at least had a friend with her).

Relief

The passenger's mom in the light blue turned up which led to a surge of relief, but also more tears brought on by the sense of relief of a friendly face. Black car was waiting for her dad to turn up and was still quiet. Light blue was saying to her mom that her car was ruined but mom was sure it could be repaired safely. I hope it can, but there was quite serious damage to the front right wing of her car. Now this is a good thing as cars are designed to "cave in" on impact, as this takes all of the shock from the accident and protects the occupants of the vehicle, so the car had done its work.

Indecision

The next emotional state was to think about what they had to do. Should they phone the police or were they not supposed to do that. I advised them to call the police as they needed to log the accident, although the reality was that it was unlikely that the police would come out (although when I left the scene a police car was heading in that direction, maybe just passing but they would have stopped to help clear the road, which we had largely done and moved the cars to the side by then to let the traffic flow.)

(Loyalty Law online)

It is important to reflect that an individual's response to an accident is uniquely theirs and the above is the response of that particular individual. There are often however, common themes.

What are some of the Emotional Impacts of Vehicle Accidents?

- According to expert Barbara Picton, B.S.R. M.E.D. RCC "following a car accident the body's normal protective mechanism is to go into shock which typically resolves over a few weeks. However, it is not uncommon for some people to find their shock symptoms persist and intrude on their daily function; for example, disturbed sleep, flash backs, fear of driving, panic attacks, feeling very emotional and having difficulty concentrating and making decisions. If these symptoms persist longer than three months then PTSD may be diagnosed by your doctor.
- The impact from this car accident/trauma will ripple through all aspects of your life, similar to when a stone is dropped into a pond. For instance, you may find your ability to work is compromised, your relationships become difficult and your social/family life is interrupted. If you have experienced a previous traumatic incident in your life, such as another accident or abuse, which you have not fully resolved, you may find memories from them resurface now, complicating your life further and increasing your pain and suffering.
- In shock, the body's hormone and nervous systems become unbalanced.
- Fear of driving.
- Panic attacks.
- Suffering from nightmares and flashbacks.
- Increased stress trying to cope with everyday things.
- Feeling guilty or worried about others who were injured or killed in the accident.
- Loss of self-esteem and financial hardship because you cannot return to work.
- Persistent physical pain that is affecting your intimate relationships.

More about the Emotional Impact

“Like other types of trauma, car accidents can cause long-term stress that affects your work and relationships and can eventually lead to depression, anxiety and sleep problems”, says Alan Steinberg, PhD.

Steinberg, director of research at the UCLA Trauma Psychiatry Program, says studies show people can have increases in their levels of stress hormones for months after even minor traumatic events.

He says if two or three months have passed since an accident and you still feel anxious, avoid certain driving situations, or have persistent thoughts or dreams about the accident, you should seek help from someone qualified in treating posttraumatic stress disorder.

“These kinds of reactions are normal and to be expected in the short-term aftermath of whatever has happened. I don’t think people should run to a psychiatrist or psychologist a week or two after. But if they start to become persistent, that’s a sign that they may become long-term and can become very debilitating”, Steinberg says.

Experiencing a vehicle accident makes more of an impact than one ever imagines. People find themselves at a loss as to know how to cope. Family members and friends often try to help but given the complexities of trauma they don’t really seem to understand. Victims might find them pulling away, confused and frustrated that you are not over this.

In a very real way the victims of trauma resulting from vehicle accidents include the people who are in the accident, their families, friends and the emergency services professionals who attend the scene and the victims during the aftermath. Victims often wonder when their life will get back to normal and are fearful that it might not ever be the same again.

Studies suggest that at least one-third of all people involved in nonfatal accidents have posttraumatic stress disorder, persistent anxiety, depression and phobias one year after the incident.

The study suggests there may be “rather large psychological complications even when the motor vehicle accidents have medically not been in the least bit serious”, says study author Richard Mayou.

In the past there has been an assumption that people who have more severe injuries are more likely to get psychiatric complications, but that is not so. Most of the more than 1,000 men and women in the study who had been taken to a hospital after an accident recovered from psychological impact within three to twelve months. Others had persistent problems or suddenly developed anxiety and other symptoms months after the accident. Interestingly, most people with persistent anxiety were passengers in the accident rather than drivers.

Mayou says “anxiety about traveling may mean feeling anxious when driving or riding in cars or avoiding cars altogether. You also may feel nervous or anxious when passing the site of the accident, seeing similar road conditions or traveling in the vehicle involved in the accident or a similar type or colour of car.”

Mayou has also found that like adults, young children often suffer anxiety and phobias after an accident. For some children the situation may be made worse by having no choice about when and where they’re traveling and also because their parents may voice their own fears and phobias about the accident to them.

Chronic Pain and Willingness

“One of the primary conditions for suffering is denial. Shutting our mind to pain, whether in ourselves or others, only ensures that it will continue. We must have the strength to face it without turning away. By opening to the pain we see around us with wisdom and compassion, we start to experience the intimate connection of our relationship with all beings.”

One of the major challenges that victims of vehicle accidents experience is pain. There are many ways to address pain. At times after trying a number of ways to address their pain, individuals find themselves challenged with chronic pain. Their doctor, physiotherapist, surgeon, relays to them that this is a condition they may just have to live with. This is a challenge for most people and they are left with a sense of disbelief, denial and a resounding NO...I can’t live my life with this pain. They find themselves spending most of their time fighting the pain and not doing and enjoying the things in life that they had formerly valued and enjoyed.

They may feel as if they are sinking in quicksand and that slowly over time the pain has sucked them under. The more they struggle, the more it sucks them under. They often feel that the suffering will never end. Pain is very much like quicksand. The more you fight it, the more of your life it takes away.

What to do? Willingness. They will need to realize that the pain may not go away. They will need to learn to live their life with this pain rather than letting it take their life away from them.

The Joe-the-Bum Metaphor

Willingness is tricky. Often people think that if you are willing to experience distress on the path toward a value, it means you have to like the distress. Other times, people think willingness is something like “just putting up with distress”, “grinning and bearing it”, or “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps”. It’s none of these things. As willingness is a complicated thing to explain, we’ll use another metaphor to try and get it across.

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Imagine that you have just moved in to a new house. You've decided to have a housewarming party and invite all the neighbours over. The sign says "everybody's welcome". Well, this includes the neighbourhood bum, Joe, who lives behind the supermarket. Joe is smelly, dirty, loud and rude. If he comes to the party, he is likely to be disruptive and unpleasant.

So, you could decide that even though you said everybody was welcome, in reality Joe is not welcome. But as soon as you do that, the party changes. Now you have to be at the front door, guarding the house and keeping Joe out.

In the meantime, life goes on, the party is going on and you are spending all your time guarding the house.

The alternative option is to welcome Joe the Bum into the party. You don't have to like him. You don't have to like the way he makes you feel.

But take a look at the costs of not being willing to have him there. When this party started, it was all about living a life you valued. Being with your friends and family, really connecting with them and doing things you enjoy. The more unwilling you are for Joe to be there, the more time you spend trying to keep him out.

The problem is, Joe, like your own distressing thoughts and feelings is really good at finding a way back in. So

very quickly, this party can become less and less about doing what matters to you and more and more about fighting a losing battle and keeping Joe away.

Try hard to imagine what it would be like to do something like this; "I don't want Joe here. He really complicates things and I never invited him. But, in the interest of making this party be about what I value, I'm going to stop spending all this time and effort trying to keep him out. I'm going to give up the fight against Joe and live my life in a way that matters to me with Joe in plain sight." This is what we mean by willingness. Dropping your resistance to distress that is already there (and that will likely come and go). Easing into it and freeing up the energy you were using to fight it to start doing what matters to you.

(Living Beyond Your Pain: Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy to Ease Chronic Pain by J Dahl PhD and T. Lundgren MS)

Where To Go For Help

Willingness and accepting chronic pain can be a real challenge. Thunder Bay Counselling Centre offers counselling that will assist you to effectively manage and overcome the symptoms that result from a traumatic Incident such as an accident.



Counselling Centre of East Algoma
Centre de counselling d'Algoma Est

9 Oakland Blvd., Suite 2
Elliot Lake, ON
P5A 2T1

Telephone: (705) 848-2585

Counselling Centre of East Algoma is celebrating 40 years of providing professional counselling to the residents of East Algoma. As a way of saying thanks, we will be hosting a comedy night September 28th, featuring Derek Edwards.

For more information, contact the agency at (705) 848-2585

Support Services for Male Survivors of Sexual Abuse

The Ontario Ministry of the Attorney General is committed to building new, province-wide services for male survivors of sexual abuse. The goal is to diminish the impact of crime and trauma on male victims and survivors of sexual abuse and related violence through increased 24-hour access to targeted support. Agencies with special competencies across the province will offer both crisis and integrated follow-up services.

If you are a male survivor of sexual abuse or if someone you know may be seeking help, please do not hesitate to call:

**Counselling Centre of East Algoma
(Satellite Office in Blind River)**

(705) 848-2585

Findhelp Information Services

(available 24/7) at 1-866-887-0015

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