1. TBI initially crushes one’s self-esteem (loss of identity). Laughing at ourselves requires healthy self-esteem, which is why we greatly admire people who effectively use self-effacing humor. It is common for a person who just sustained a brain injury to go through a period of self-loathing during the initial adjustment. During this time, put down humor is common, directed at their “new-self,” because they don’t like their “new-self.”

2. Everyday life is extremely difficult for survivors. Impaired executive functions set them up for non-stop mishaps and mayhem. Mobility problems add spills and frustration. Survivors already draw plenty of unwanted attention to themselves by the confusion and disturbances they create. They are very sensitive to people being annoyed with them and giving them looks, which feeds into their paranoia and fear of people laughing at them or making fun of them.

3. The survivor’s ability to accurately assess or logically reason may be impaired or fluctuate. This interferes with their ability to easily “get” a joke or interpret something as humorous because incongruences or absurdities don’t stand out to them. Even when they are able to detect that something isn’t correct, they can’t always identify exactly what’s not right. It is common that the survivor will need to ask someone to explain the punch-line of a joke. Also, survivors rarely can “read between the lines.”

4. Normal conversation moves rapidly for a survivor because their information processing speeds tend to run slower than average. Figuring out humor is more complex and takes even longer. Survivors either miss the humor altogether, or when they finally “get it,” the conversation has long moved on. If the survivor figures out the humor, they laugh noticeably late. All eyes turn to the survivor and now the group laughs a second time, at the absurdity of the survivor’s delayed laugh.

5. Brain injury persons tend to think and speak “literally,” all or some of the time. Thinking literally interferes with the survivor’s ability to correctly understand an intended meaning—no reading between the lines. Teasing gets mistaken for truth. The survivor’s “clueless” behaviors appear comical and trigger laughter from the group, drawing more unwanted attention to the survivor. It’s disheartening for the survivor, who is working so hard to experience the joy of humor. Humor in this case excludes the survivor from being part of the group. He feels left out, exhausted and “stupid.”

6. Misinterpreting others’ laughter causes confusion for the survivor. Even when group laughter is not targeted at the survivor, he might feel ridiculed, or embarrassed and get his feelings hurt because he believes that others are laughing at him or looking down on him.

   Or, survivors may interpret laughter to mean that they believed that what they said or did was funny or entertaining. They might repeat their behavior without realizing that the laughter was triggered by shock or surprise. Later they feel embarrassed for not being able to recognize the source of the laughter until someone explains why people were laughing. Then they feel horrified and stupid because they misinterpreted the situation.

7. Many survivors have childlike qualities (not childish) and their funny bone is easily tickled. When over-tired, they become vulnerable to acting childish and silly or laughing at inappropriate times.

---

**Hangin’ on with humor when life looks ugly . . .**

©2018 Lois McElravy  ★  406.251.2887  ★  info@lessonsfromlois.com  ★  www.lessonsfromlois.com