

Surprising Help for Brain Injury Survivors

Medical professionals can figure out the intricacies of your illnesses and assign cutting-edge treatments to relieve them. They can fix broken bones and manage chronic ailments. But one thing they can't do is relate to what you are going through.

Heather Shepherd Baker, administrative director of the NCH Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging & Rehabilitation, and her staff came to that realization working with patients suffering from brain injuries.

"No matter how much expertise and professional prowess our staff has, we haven't been there, done that," Baker says.

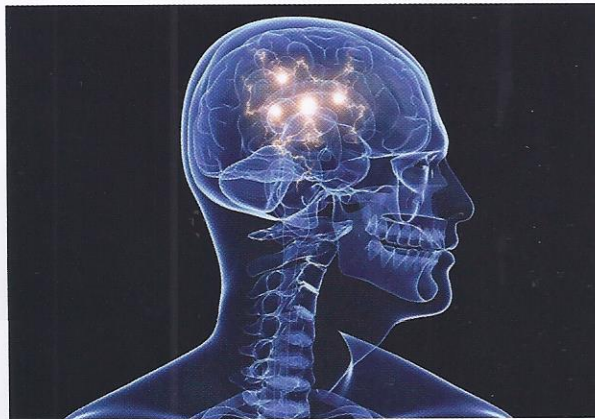
Brain injury patients face a particular set of challenges. Their wide-ranging injuries may have altered their emotions, memories, cognitive abilities, speech and/or personalities. All the while, they may look physically healthy, further frustrating them and perplexing their families.

Baker wanted these patients to hear from people who had survived similar injuries and could offer hope and first-hand advice. NCH Volunteer Services Director Amanda Smith discovered a ready-made solution:

A Georgia woman who'd suffered a brain injury in a car crash 16 years ago had started the "Brain Injury Peer Visitor Association," matching survivors with those early in their recoveries.

"I felt lost. I was scared. I had no one to help me. I didn't know I had a brain injury. Sixteen years ago, there were no books on the subject," says Ann Boriskie, the association's founder.

Boriskie trains volunteers to meet with patients in hospitals and rehabilitation centers. She has developed thick packets of information that help patients and family members understand what to expect, what to do and where to get additional help.



NCH, which began peer visits in July 2013, is the first hospital outside Georgia to sign on.

Chris Thomas, a Brookdale records analyst, jumped at the chance to volunteer. He was in a car accident in 2001. Much like Boriskie, his injury went long undiagnosed as he and his family sought answers to the problems Thomas suffered.

"I was out there on my own figuring out what to do and who to see," Thomas said. Now he offers reassurance and guidance to Brookdale brain injury patients and their families.

"We can prepare them for what to look forward to and understand they are not alone," Thomas says. "There is hope for them to get better."

Sheila Greenspan, of Naples, remembers Thomas visiting her following a fall that caused her brain to bleed in three areas and created a subdural hematoma, a collection of blood in tissue layers outside the brain. Within about five months, she went from being almost non-communicable to being back on the tennis court and operating her business consulting firm.

"I think it's an extraordinary survival," she says. "Some of it is physical, of course. But a lot of it is mental. I was not about to die and not about to live as an invalid. The only choice was to get better."

She appreciated that about Thomas, too, his attitude and emphasis on what was possible. "I believe that ... if your attitude is positive," Greenspan says, "if you work at it every day, you will get there."

If you would like to volunteer with the NCH Volunteer Brain Injury Peer Mentor Program, please call Amanda Smith at (239) 624-3415. **NH**