



Mandy Jeffery

A Survivor's Story
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Did you know that June is Brain Injury Awareness Month in Canada? This month, we're shining a Spotlight On Brain Injury.

Help us raise awareness about brain injury in Canada by following along with our posts & sharing our posts with your friends! !

#SPOTLIGHTONBRAININJURY

Hello, my name is Mandy Jeffery and I am going to start off this article by admitting out loud that.... "I totally suck... I will never get 'there'; I am not trying hard enough; I should be back to 'normal' by now; I am scattered; I am a burden; I have lost my purpose and identity; I am broken; I am scared; I am an angry beast with a short fuse who is frustrated daily..." and the list of thought distortions goes on and on. I share these very unflattering statements so that you know that you are not alone. We all struggle with negative self talk from time to time. Following, I am going to share some insights that I have learned (and re-learned, and re-learned, and re-learned) along the way but I felt it was important for you to "see" all of me so that you can identify with the struggles and hopefully share in some of the victories for yourself. I honestly don't have it all figured out. I teeter totter from motivation to frustration, but I continue to practise some of the following techniques with the end goal being that I eventually come to a place of balance and acceptance.

The backstory: I was in an MVA in May of 2018 that resulted in soft tissue injuries, whiplash and a concussion. It has now been over three years and I still struggle with pain and post-concussion syndrome. For those of you that have not heard of it, post-concussion syndrome is simply persistent concussion symptoms that last beyond the expected recovery period. For me, that is headaches, pain, fatigue, dizziness, noise/light sensitivity, visual and vestibular changes, cognitive issues (multitasking and memory) and mood issues (irritability, anxiety and anger etc.) As far as I understand it, these symptoms can be different and to varying degrees for everyone. Immediately after the MVA I could no longer do many of the things that I used to do. It felt like I needed help for almost everything for a while. My heart would break when my 9 year old son would say things like - "I miss it when you used to actually play with us" or "you are not the person you used to be mom" (in reference to my short fuse and irritability). Light and noise sensitivity made me feel captive in my own home at times because I could not tolerate it well for very long. My driver's license was medically revoked and it set me on a path of complete dependence on others.

It was during this early phase that I needed to learn that asking for help was a sign of courage and wisdom and not weakness. It forced me to practice communication so I could collaborate on ideas and solutions with those around me. Communication also allowed me to have someone to share the burdens with me when I became overwhelmed and even drew a couple of my relationships closer. So lesson one for me was COMMUNICATION.

Lesson two was definitely to SLOW DOWN! I have to admit that I am STILL working on this! Many of you that have experienced a concussion have heard of pacing. Often the occupational therapist on your team will give you tools to plan your day out as a way to conserve your energy so that you can make it through your day without a crash. For me I have learned that pacing runs far deeper than simply conserving energy. I have discovered through my writing that slowing down and planning my resources also helps to manage my emotions and the ensuing guilt and shame connected when I lose control of them. When I respect my boundaries and resist the urge to push too hard (which leaves me depleted) I not only avoid crashes, but I am also far less likely to become frustrated, lose my temper, and become depressed. Also, slowing down provides more opportunities to breathe deep. We all have heard that deep breathing can reduce cortisol (which is related to stress) but did you know that it can also reduce pain, improve immunity, calm anxiety, increase energy, help you sleep AND reduce inflammation?!?! So everyone, let's slow down and BREATHE DEEP.

Lesson three...RELEASE EXPECTATIONS! Again, I am STILL working on this one...I regularly need to re-read some of my earlier writings or have a loved one or team member remind me of this one too. We need to release all expectations of where we think we should be, or what we think we ought to be able to do, or how far along we think that we should be in the recovery process, or even our expectations of exactly how far we can make it towards being "normal" again! Instead, take the time to enjoy the small victories. Expectations set you up for feelings of frustration and depression and completely cloud over your victories. Forward momentum IS still momentum no matter how small or slow it may be. Releasing expectations opens up the opportunity to appreciate each accomplishment along the way.

Lesson four...Practise SELF LOVE. How do I do that you ask? I love myself by preemptively respecting my boundaries and by resisting the urge to push too hard, leaving myself depleted. I have come to realize this mistake leaves me defenceless to the monster that is anger. I can learn to accept my limitations without equating them to personality flaws. I can seize the opportunity to open myself up by sharing these struggles with those around me so we can collaborate on ideas and also share in the burden when I become overwhelmed. This struggle can then be transmuted into an opportunity to draw these relationships closer instead of pushing them further away! Also make sure to take time for yourself: Go for a walk in nature; work in your garden; write in your journal; take a bath...all these forms of self love can help to "top up your tank" giving you more reserves to share with those that you love. This is how self love IS LOVE!

For now I will end on this...recovery is a process with both ups and downs. You will have forward momentum, you will have plateaus and you will even hit some harder down times ... that is all normal. By accepting this process it can help give us the courage to put our best foot forward.

The Recovery Process

Life
is built upon
Polarities
And cycles...
A roller coaster
Has highs and lows.
A mountain
has peaks and valleys.
A wave
has crests and troughs.
The moon
waxes and wanes.
And the uterus
menstruates and proliferates.
Recovery is
Absolutely no different.
It cycles between:
motivation and frustration
pride and pity
hope and despair
achievement and defeat
confidence and doubt.
Embrace the cycles
Both highs AND lows
Accept them
as part of the journey
Do not judge them
nor attach any shame.
Do not fall victim
To the single dimension
Of just surviving
To avoid the lows.
It is a flat plane
That will bring you
limited accomplishment
limited opportunity
for growth and joy
And little appreciation
For how far you have come
Or how high
You can truly reach!

With Deepest Love and Gratitude,

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