

A Plan for Success following TBI

“The Four F’s” — Faith, Family, Friends & Fortitude

Charlie Morris, a Vietnam veteran and TBI / PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) survivor, provides an inspirational message about hope and success. His message to other survivors is “Be the best you can be.” Charlie’s plan for success begins with what he terms the “Four F’s” — Faith, Family, Friends and Fortitude.

Faith — A firm believer, Charlie breaks down “faith” into three parts:

Part 1: Faith in God.

You need to believe and have faith in God or in something greater than yourself. This is essential for each individual because it helps you through the really rough times. When I am down and out, I rely on faith and prayer.

Part 2: Build faith in others.

Everyone needs to establish friendships and associations — you have to build faith in other people. It is especially important for individuals diagnosed with TBI and PTSD. Often, when people experience a traumatic event, they tend to withdraw from relationships. Learning to trust others is not only therapeutic; it’s necessary for success. But I do want to stress, pick who you trust carefully so that you will not be disappointed.

It’s important to take baby steps when building faith in others. Start off slowly, with one or two people. A good choice is a therapist or a close family member. For those suffering from PTSD, it is common to believe that no one else will understand. When I opened up to others, I found understanding and camaraderie especially when someone had a similar experience. You don’t have to share everything all at once; instead open up little by little. Friendships are immensely helpful and therapeutic. Group therapies can also provide great support.

Part 3: Have faith in yourself.

Many individuals with brain injuries find themselves with deficits they had not encountered in the past. It creates self-esteem problems and causes feelings of inadequacy. To overcome this, you have to change your self-perception and give yourself credit for small accomplishments. Know that if you try hard, more often than not, you can improve and get better. Positive things do happen. At the beginning, it’s hard to believe in yourself, but realize that when you set a goal that cannot be met, that’s OK —



Charlie (left) and his son Matt

you tried and deserve credit for your effort. Survivors need to set goals, give themselves credit for accomplishments and accept that some goals may not be attainable.

Learn to accept limitations and remember — if you don’t learn to love yourself, you will never be happy with anything you have. There was a time in my life when I didn’t like myself. I was not happy with my condition and I found my limitations to be very irritating. This caused me to be unhappy with others and myself. As I progressed in recovery, I began to realize that this was going to be “as good as it gets.” Acceptance provides peace. You can accept and like yourself just the way you are. That doesn’t mean you don’t continually strive for improvement; it means you have a sense of satisfaction and peace.

Family & Friends

I wouldn’t be where I am today without strong family support. I learned that I couldn’t do everything myself and sometimes needed to lean on others. For those who don’t have strong family ties, adopt a family. Make a family from your close circle of friends or extended family members — but do not latch on to one person and expect him or her to be everything to you. Adopt many friends, go to several family members for help. You don’t

A Plan for Success *continued*

want to overburden one individual. There are many wonderful people out there who are willing to help us.

Make a point to talk to friends and family about experiences and tell them about your likes and dislikes. It is common for survivors with brain injuries and PTSD to shut others out. I wrote a book about my life and recovery, and my wife only learned what I felt and experienced by reading my book. That is sad. Why didn't I share with her? I didn't think my feelings and experiences were important and I didn't think she would understand. If you don't communicate with family and friends, they will not understand you. When you decide to reach out, make sure it's not to the wrong person. For example, if you are struggling with alcohol or drugs and you have a friend with the same problem, his or her solution to problems might be self-medication, which will only add to your difficulties. Another scenario is reaching out to an individual who is not able to relate to someone with a brain injury. Reaching out to such a person may cause feelings of rejection, reinforcing the idea that "nobody understands." Make sure you choose a positive friend. For survivors, it's nice to be part of a brain injury support group and find friends there. Peer support is crucial.

Fortitude

Finally, to be successful you must have fortitude. I think the best way to explain this concept is to quote Winston Churchill — *"Success is going from failure to failure without a loss of enthusiasm."*

Fortitude is trying something. Even when it's not a success, you can feel good that you did try. Sometimes you may come to the realization that there are limits and you won't succeed, but know there is something else you can do. Work to improve your quality of life and health. There will be setbacks and that's all part of the process. Setbacks are OK — everybody has them.

It's sad when I see survivors give up because of failures. During times of frustration, you can find a new approach. Do all you can with what you have and don't ask anymore of yourself. This awareness took a long time for me, but I finally got there. The sooner you get there, the happier you will be.

If you are unable to do something you love, such as a hobby, you may not be perfect at it but it'll be fun! You'll be living and enjoying your life and that's worth a lot. I enjoy athletics and with all the adaptive items available, there are so many possibilities. I love playing tennis and have played for more than 30 years even without the use of one arm. Don't put unnecessary limits on yourself. You can be with your friends having a great time instead

of staying home alone thinking "poor me." I play sports with disabled friends and many that are not disabled.

I would like to share one last thought with you. I often run into former students who say, *"Mr. Morris, I never told you this when I was in high school, but I wanted you to know that you were always a great example for me. No matter what happened, you went on and never gave up."*

The key is; never stop growing. ❖

Charlie's Story

A Vietnam veteran and survivor of TBI and PTSD, Charlie Morris grew up in Ohio with the ambition to join the Navy and learn a trade. He married in 1966 and three years later fulfilled his dream of joining the military. After completing his training, Charlie was stationed in Vietnam as part of the Navy Seawolves. Eventually he became part of the Sealords, a group that served as a pickup and delivery service to and from Seawolf detachments in the field.

On Jan. 9, 1971 Charlie was flying a mission in the Mekong Delta with two rookie helicopter pilots. Flying fast and low, the helicopter followed a canal. As they passed a village they noticed something odd — it was empty. All of the sudden they heard small-arms fire. Charlie tried to locate the source when he went outside the door to investigate. Charlie saw a lone man in the doorway of a hut pointing an AK-47 at the helicopter. As he swung back inside, he realized he was hit.

Charlie was transported to Long Binh and was prepped for neurosurgery. The result of his injuries included right side paralysis with the prognosis to spend the rest of his life in a wheelchair. After his Navy discharge, through hard work and determination, Charlie was able to overcome and manage his physical disabilities. He eventually was accepted into Kent State University where he earned his college degree in education.

Charlie became a high school teacher and taught for 18 years. Over the years, he endured not only the physical and cognitive issues associated with traumatic brain injury, but he also learned to cope with a severe case of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He retired from teaching in 1995. Today, Charlie works as a volunteer at the VA helping PTSD survivors and counseling brain injury survivors. In 2006, he published the book "Just A Regular Guy," based on his life story, and professionally speaks to PTSD veteran groups, brain injury groups and TBI associations.

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A Plan for Success *continued*

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