

TO ALL TBI SURVIVORS

Create a successful life.**by Kara Swanson**

Kara is the author of "I'll Carry the Fork!" and speaks nationally about brain injury from the survivor's perspective



My legs don't work all that well, even nine years post injury. I can't always feel my right foot and I enjoy so little balance. I still suffer headaches and I have a difficult time tolerating crowds, with plans that change, and executing multiple tasks.

When I get tired my words get stuck and, sometimes, I can't find the one I'm hoping to say. I don't remember everything I'd like to and I have a hard time reading and negotiating numbers.

Yet, despite all the residual symptoms, I am a successfully-recovered survivor of my injury. And, despite all the "windows of recovery" that closed long ago, I continue to heal. How?

From the moment we are injured, we compare our new selves to the ones we knew before our brains were damaged. We measure our recoveries by how much we reclaim and how closely we resemble our pre-injury selves.

If it is only by that comparison we gauge our progress after injury, not many of us would be considered successful in our recoveries. For even those who reclaim all of their pre-injury functioning, the experience leaves us indelibly changed.

While most would consider it obvious that brain injury changes the way we think, I submit that it is essential that brain injury change the way we think. If we are to really heal, we must process the experience beyond simply grading the skills and

abilities left to us. We must see ourselves and embrace our lives differently. We must change our definition of "normal" and allow happiness, success and satisfaction to emerge from paths we, before this, haven't traveled.

We need to stop comparing ourselves to who we once were. It is unfair and unproductive. If I am going to compare my inability to run now to how I used to run before my injury, I might as well compare my slap shot to Steve Yzerman's or compare my bike riding now to Lance Armstrong's.

Instead of torturing ourselves by comparing how lousy our lives or abilities are now to how wonderful they once were, we need to compare how much better we have it to how much worse it could have been. Life is no paltry consolation prize when, for each of us, death drew so near.

Healing is about choosing to set our sights on the future and choosing to let go of the past. At some point, we have to stop failing in a life that no longer exists and start creating one we can succeed in and enjoy. How different were our lives from high school to college? From college to joining the workforce? From single to married? In those instances we accepted significant changes. We started over and we found ways again to succeed.

Change is what life is all about. Brain injury or not. It doesn't have to mean worse. This is another phase in life.

Another chapter. Another transition. A new beginning. Rather than hating what was lost, I choose to be grateful for the time I was involved in those activities I no longer enjoy. I allow them to sleep softly in my past like the cartwheels I could turn when I was eight or the back flips I performed off the high dive when I was fifteen. I look at the best of those abilities like dear photographs. I close that album and I go on. And I get better. And I achieve.

Successful recovery from brain injury requires, not only finding new interests and new perspectives, but simply choosing to seek them. I did not become successfully recovered because I wrote a book after my injury. I became successfully recovered because, despite the many times I stumbled, I dared dream that I could.

While there are certainly great losses to grieve, we need to acknowledge them and then allow them to go. At some point, we have to set down the sadness, the anger and, for some, the guilt that have sought to take our futures. Hasn't the injury taken enough? Isn't it time we allow our broken hearts to heal? We have outstanding lives to live!

Each of you has something special to offer. You are strong and vital and inspiring. Enjoy your second life as the remarkable gift it is. I wish you all Godspeed and I'll look for you as we aim for the top of the mountain!

Take "Kara" yourselves! ♦