

## Sense of Self and Personal Identity

### Description of the problem

Our sense of who we are is closely tied to what we can do. Sudden changes in ability and personality can cause the student with a brain injury to be unsure of who they are. When struggling with identity issues, a student can be moody, depressed or irritable, making daily classroom functioning a challenge. Often, academics and relationships are impacted.

### Causes

A serious brain injury can dramatically and permanently alter what a student can do. A student who has always been “the smart one” might lag academically. A “jock” might find athletics permanently off-limits. Creating a new sense of self can take months or years and come at a high psychological cost.

### Solution

Teachers, families and friends may need to be involved to help the student rebuild their sense of self. They can interact with students in ways that can help build a positive, realistic personal identity.

### Strategies

- **Communicate positively and respectfully with the student**

Empty praise is likely to be counter-productive. Instead, offer real, positive comments and constructive criticism as the student is able to hear and accept it. Be patient.

Example: Instead of saying, “It’s okay you failed the test, I know you will do better next time,” try saying “I know you put a lot of effort into this and feel disappointed about your grade, so let’s see if we can come up with some ideas to help you get a higher grade next time.”

- **Work with parents to build positive associations**

All people, with or without a disability, use a variety of associations in building their personal identity. Most people include heroes or other respected individuals in their sense of themselves. Help your student identify someone he admires and can associate his behavior with and remind the student of these associations throughout the day to encourage positive behavior.

Example: If your student with anger identifies with Batman you can remind him that Batman’s character calls for control and restraint, not outbursts.

## Strategies continued

- **Provide tasks**

Find important and meaningful tasks and hold the student to a reasonably high standard while providing enough support to ensure the student can meet that standard at least most of the time. Positive self-identity comes from successful completion of challenging, meaningful tasks.

Example: If your student has trouble with organization, but values completing all of her work, help her create a daily checklist to ensure each assignment is turned in. Practice using the checklist with her daily, then reduce to every other day. Finally, check in weekly and review with her how far she has come since first starting to use the checklist.

- **Help students cope with defeat**

Everyone has to deal with failures and defeats, but students faced with new cognitive or physical limitations often face failures in what they were. A student who used to be on the track team may now struggle to keep her balance. A student who was always quick to learn new concepts in math class may now be falling behind as new material is introduced. Often, the area the student is now failing in used to be their greatest strength. Talk with the student about how problems occur and how they might be avoided in the future.

Example: If your student doesn't complete a book report because he can't remember what the story was about after reading it, suggest that next time he take notes on the main points of each chapter and use this while writing the report. Or, watch the movie version and pause it to write down details while the memory of the story is still intact.

**Notes:**

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