

GUEST COLUMN

Hidden from sight: The emotional effects of a concussion on adolescents

By Julia Shults

Imagine you are a middle or high school student; how do you spend your day? You are in school from 8a.m.-3p.m., and perhaps at practice, rehearsal, or a club meeting until 5p.m. This means that on any given school day, students spend 7-10 hours away from home, surrounded by peers, coaches, and teachers; laughing, socializing, and actively engaging the brain.

A concussion changes this. Suddenly, the injured student is removed from this constant stream of socialization and forced to recover at home. In addition to the well-known physical consequences of head injuries, concussions can take an emotional toll as well. This is especially true for adolescents, who seem to have a slower physical recovery than the average period for all age groups.

In most cases, individuals are symptomatic for about a week and return to full activity within two weeks of the initial injury. But according to the National Institute of Health, in 10-20 percent of cases, concussion symptoms last for over two weeks. While symptomatic, individuals are not only out of school, but also cannot attend most after-school activities or social events, use smartphones, computers, or other screens, or do many of the other things they are used to. The result: feelings of isolation, frustration, loss of identity, fear of re-injury, and more, all of which increase as recovery time increases too.

Most high school students create an identity

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for themselves based on what activities they participate in and are good at. Whether he or she is a talented performer, star athlete, or diligent student, a concussion means that, at least temporarily, an individual can no longer be that person.

Take, for example, the high-achieving student: normally he always attends class, completes his assignments, and can rely on receiving praise, respect, and validation from teachers and high scores. After an injury, however, he must avoid schoolwork in order to recover. Furthermore, even as he transitions back to school, he may barely be able to tolerate being present in class, let alone taking notes and doing homework. Even with the most accommodating teachers, the student may feel pressure each time someone asks about his progress, feeling like he is not meeting expectations.

A similar process occurs with sports, theater, service, and basically all other activities. In any case, this situation can provoke feelings of failure, frustration, lack of control, and losing oneself, all of which are extremely distressing.

Possibly even more distressing than not being able to rely on one's routine is being away from friends.

Not only is a concussed student removed from school and activities, but he or she must also avoid all screens. This means no texting, Snapchat, or social media which, combined with school, make up the majority interaction among teens. Individuals feel out of the loop; they do not hear gossip, know who's going to prom with who, or worse, may worry that they will be forgotten and will not have a date themselves. They feel left out; their friends are going to a movie or game, but they cannot go because the lights are too bright or the sounds are too loud.

As recovery time goes on, these feelings only worsen. Her friends, who were very worried and sympathetic at first, may no longer take the time to invite her places, assuming she will just have to decline. The once busy, social teen is suddenly always home and alone, with little to do besides eat, rest, and worry. The entire experience is incredibly isolating; isolating from one's usual self, isolating from friends, isolating from the fast-paced outside world.

With so many different factors and very little ability to control the pace of recovery, what can you do? At this point, there is no easy or guaranteed way to alleviate the physical pain,

but you can try to ease the emotional burden.

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If you are a teacher, be patient. Every concussion and recovery is different, so listen to the student's needs and compromise for what needs to be done, what can be disregarded, or possibly how assignments can be reformatted.

If you are a friend, reach out, listen, or just sit with them. Instead of going to the mall one day, maybe offer to go over to your recovering friend's house and just hang out. It may be difficult to understand exactly what your friend is going through, or he or she may not even feel up to being with people. Whatever the situation, she will appreciate you reaching out and acknowledging that you miss her.

Finally, if you yourself are suffering from a concussion, know that you are not alone. There is little discussion about the emotional effects, but almost everybody who suffers an extended recovery is feeling what you may be feeling. And furthermore, have hope; it takes time, sometimes a long time, but things will get better.

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