

You Only Get One Brain: An Exploratory Retrospective Study On Life After Adolescent TBI

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Abstract : There is a relatively scarce body of literature regarding adolescent experiences of traumatic brain injury (TBI). This qualitative study explored how sustaining a TBI at this unique stage of development might impact a young person as they navigate the challenges of adolescence and transition to adulthood, and what might support recovery. Thirteen young adults who sustained a mild-moderate TBI as an adolescent (aged 13 - 17 years), approximately 7.7 years (range = 6.7 - 8.0 years) prior, participated in the research. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to explore participants' experiences surrounding and following their TBIs. Thematic analysis of interview data produced five key categories of findings: (1) Following their TBIs, many participants experienced problems with cognitive (e.g., forgetfulness, concentration difficulties), physical (e.g., migraines, fatigue) and emotional (e.g., depression, anxiety) functioning, which were often endured into adulthood. (2) TBI-related problems often adversely affected important areas of life for the participant, including school, work and friendships. (3) Changes following TBI commonly impacted identity formation. (4) Recovery processes evolved over time as the participants coped initially by just 'getting on with it', before learning to accept new limitations and, ultimately, growing from their TBI experiences. (5) While the presence of friends and family assisted recovery, struggles were often exacerbated by a lack of emotional support from others, in addition to the absence of any assistance or information-provision from professionals regarding what to expect following TBI. The findings suggest that even mild TBI sustained during adolescence can have consequences for an individual's functioning, engagement in life and identity development, whilst also giving rise to post-traumatic growth. Recovery following adolescent TBI might be maximised by facilitating greater understanding of the injury and acknowledging its impacts on important areas of life, as well as the provision of emotional support and facilitating self-reflection and meaning-making.

Keywords : adolescent, brain Injury, qualitative, post-traumatic growth

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