

## **Catastrophic Reaction**

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Understanding catastrophic reaction is an important component of treating brain injury. A catastrophic reaction occurs when an individual becomes overloaded. A catastrophic reaction may be a verbal outburst, a physical outburst, throwing an item, or simply shutting down and “flooding.” **Flooding** is when a person is unable to take in new information because he or she has mentally and emotionally shut down. It may appear that the lights are on but nobody is home.

Prior to a brain injury, people have different coping skills and ways of handling stress. Some people may have handled stressful situations very gracefully before their injury, while others may have chosen to isolate or might try to avoid the stressful situation. Still others might have turned to substance abuse.

These methods of coping, both good and bad, are compromised by a brain injury. Increased fatigue and anxiety further diminish an individual’s coping skills. If you were to think of a time where you were extremely sleep deprived, or perhaps hung over, it may give you an idea of the difficulties that face a person with a brain injury.

For people with brain injuries there are countless stressors. A stressor can be the inability to think of a word, problems remembering a task, a problem with a relationship, difficulty with finances, or a reminder of their condition. It can be the feeling that he or she is not in control of their own life. Or it can even be a misconception of what someone said or did.

In their reduced state of functioning, a person with a brain injury will often perseverate (obsess) on or about a stressor. **Perseveration** is when a person obsessively thinks about something to the extent that he or she is unable to think much about anything else.

Sometimes all it takes is the addition of one small stressor and the person will explode. This reaction is called catastrophic because at that moment the individuals feel as though the whole world is against them. Often it is a severe over-reaction to the stressor. During a catastrophic reaction, logic is useless and problem-solving skills are non-existent. The individual may seem angry, stubborn and illogical.

When in the midst of a catastrophic reaction, a person will see the problem they are dealing with as encompassing everything. It is all that he or she can see, and as a result, *at that moment everything in the world is horrible*. Typically, the reaction is far greater than the actual problem would ever warrant.

As long as the individual and the people around them are safe, it is best to **remain calm** and wait until the person has calmed down, and then quietly address the behavior and try and uncover the underlying stressors. Patience is important. Trying to address their behavior during a catastrophic reaction will only cause their behaviors to escalate further. Be patient.

In the aftermath of a catastrophic reaction, after the person has calmed down and their problem-solving reboots, the person with a brain injury will often be embarrassed. He or she may not say anything because of embarrassment or they may apologize. Understand that it is part of their brain injury and help them move on.

## **Adaptation / Coping Skills**

At The Brain Injury Rehabilitation Center, we assist people in adjusting to life with a brain injury. Our trained staff focuses on coping strategies that can be implemented for each individual.

Cognitive therapy works on each individual's cognitive deficits, leading to greater improvement in those areas, further reducing anxiety of deficits. Problem solving skills are taught in all areas of our program and in all areas of life including community living and employment.

Compensation techniques, such as using a daily planner, enable an individual to have a sense of control over their life and a sense of continuity. For example, though a person may not be able to remember an appointment or important phone number, they can find the information more easily. Prior to implementing this compensation technique, they may have had catastrophic reactions when unable to find needed information or forgot an appointment.

Individual and group counseling is designed to promote acceptance and adjustment to brain injury. Our Pain and Stress Management Group teaches relaxation techniques that can aid in reducing and controlling stress. Individual counseling can also work on issues that particularly challenging for that individual. The Awareness Group aids each individual in better understanding their brain injury as well as how it may affect others.

Additionally, our emphasis on healthy lifestyles incorporates exercise into a person's weekly schedule. This helps build up endurance, reduce fatigue and improve self-esteem.

These are just some of the ways we work toward reducing catastrophic reactions and helping the individual take back control over their life and their emotions.