

empower

empowering TAC clients by
sharing stories and information

In this edition

In this edition of Empower, we take a look at how people's relationships change after an accident. Some change, many improve, and often new relationships form along the path towards recovery.

We chat to Greg and his sister Deb, whose 12 year age gap meant they hadn't really known each other very well until Greg's accident. Now they live together and share many interests and friends. Greg's life has changed dramatically after his brain injury, but that hasn't stopped him pursuing new interests, getting out into the community and of course, meeting new people.

We also meet Alex and his mother Mary-Anne. Alex's motorcycle crash four years ago when he 16 was a wake up call that resulted in him finding a new focus and appreciation for life. While they were always close, Alex and Mary-Anne now enjoy a bond that reflects the strength of love they share following his life changing accident.

Sam's accident brought his already close family closer together. Sam's mum Chris played an active role in his recovery, and was there every step of the way along the journey to achieving an active and fulfilling life. Sam's active community spirit has seen him recently find a new partner, and take that next step in his journey.

Help build the TAC's new individualised funding model

The TAC is building a new individualised funding model for clients.

And, as it's being designed and built for you, we believe it's important you are given the opportunity to have real influence over how it will work

So we're inviting you to participate in developing the new model from the very beginning and helping us improve how support services are delivered.

About individualised funding

Individualised funding has been available to TAC clients with disabilities for almost ten years.

Clients approved to use it receive monthly funds from the TAC to pay for the support services they need as a result of their accident injuries.

For example, instead of the TAC approving funding for two hours of home services, ten hours of attendant care and three hours of physiotherapy each week, a client would receive a payment from the TAC for the total cost of these services.

This client would then decide how to use these funds without having to contact the TAC.

Individualised funding gives clients the flexibility to adjust their levels of support to suit their needs and lifestyle. It also gives clients more choice and control over the supports they use.

Individualised funding has worked well, but we think it could work better.

How you can help

To build our new individualised funding model, the TAC needs input from health care professionals and disability providers. We also need help from the people we value the most, the people the model is being designed for – our clients.

You will be able to provide your thoughts, suggestions and ideas in a variety of ways.

Interested in getting involved? Your first step is to contact your Support Coordinator to receive more information.

We value your feedback. Together we can build a new individualised funding model to help TAC clients with disabilities on their journey to greater independence.

Alex

A new outlook on life

I landed on my head and ended up face down in a puddle, not breathing. Luckily my mate was able to call an ambulance, and while we were waiting he received CPR instructions over the phone and brought me back.



I look forward to every single day and what's around the corner.

My motorcycle accident happened four years ago when I was 16. I'd been drinking at a party when a friend and I decided to go to Mornington – I rode and he was on the back. We got lost on the back roads and crashed. I landed on my head and ended up face down in a puddle, not breathing. Luckily my mate was able to call an ambulance, and while we were waiting he received CPR instructions over the phone and brought me back. The ambulance took me to Arthur's Seat car park where I was transferred to a chopper and flown to The Alfred Hospital.

My injuries were extensive and consisted of a broken eye socket, three fractures to the left side of my skull, my left ear being ripped off my head and minor lacerations. I also had a brain injury which left me in a coma for over a week.

I was in hospital for two months and had four months inpatient rehabilitation. This was followed by about 18 months of outpatient rehabilitation. Physically my recovery was phenomenal. I had such great people around me and I worked extremely hard to learn to walk and talk again. I had numerous mates comment on how driven and motivated I was throughout my recovery.

The hardest thing for me was getting my mind back! My brain injury meant I was a baby again for a while. For example, I didn't know that if I sat outside in the sun I would get burnt and I thought I was going to die when I got a cold. I'd forgotten some fundamental things that most people take for granted.

People look at me and assume I'm 100% fine. Close to, but not there yet. Although my left arm and leg are okay they're a bit slower than the rest of me. If it's cold I get a slight limp, and I have a trachy scar on my neck and a peg scar on my belly.

People look at me and assume I'm 100% fine.

The most significant thing about my recovery has been the change in my mindset. Before the accident, I was 16 and invincible, getting kicks out of doing the wrong things with my mates. The accident was the wake up call I needed. I'm now very perceptive and am able to read people. Some of this has to do with maturity, but I wouldn't have reached this maturity if I'd continued hanging out with that old group of people.

My interests haven't changed since the accident. I always enjoyed hiking, camping and the great outdoors. Now my love of the outdoors has been accentuated. My other great hobby is welding and building things. I didn't actually forget how to do this. I just had to get used to it again. It took me a little while to start creating aesthetically pleasing things again. I was brought up with welding and have many projects on the go including go-karts, steam engines, shelves, tables and chairs, remote control ships; you name it. Now I want to start stepping up my projects so they're bigger, better and more gnarly! I recently purchased a 1982 Holden WB panel van which needs some work.



At the moment I am studying an Advanced Diploma of Mechatronics Engineering at TAFE. It's a combination of mechanical and electronic engineering. I am also doing a part time traineeship. The manager told me that when I started, my technical skills amazed them. It just shows how my hobbies have been a great strength.

My relationship with my mum has really developed as a result of the accident. We were always good with each other – respectful and close, but now we're really tight. She quit her engineering job to be with me through my recovery. We don't live together but we see each other regularly. We cook together and thoroughly enjoy each others' company – we give each other strength.

When you're recovering, you need to think – I can do it, anything can be done. Persistence and state of mind is 90% of the job. Nothing can stop you if you have the right mindset. I honestly know – not think – that I can make a difference to people's perspective and views on life. I have started to think about doing some motivational speaking. The accident has been a true, true strength to me in learning to appreciate life. I look forward to every single day and what's around the corner.

If you're suffering from depression, there are organisations that can help:

Beyond Blue

1300 224 636
www.beyondblue.org.au

Lifeline

131 141
www.lifeline.org.au

Road Trauma Support Team

1300 367 797
www.rtstv.org.au

Mary-Anne, Alex's mum

I got to the hospital a couple of hours after Alex had arrived. The following Monday I resigned my job and spent 12 hours a day for the next six months by his side. It's right what Alex said – he was like a baby again. I touched him, talked to him, washed him, cleaned his teeth, changed his nappy, toilet trained him, read to him and welcomed his visitors. If I noticed he wanted to sit up, I helped him. When he was allowed to eat, I fed him very small amounts until he learned to eat on his own, and gave him liquids on a spoon until he learned to drink.

Once he was able to sit in a chair with wheels, I took him out of his room around the hospital. Eventually he got a proper wheelchair and we went over the road to the park and then further daily until we got as far as the Botanic Gardens, which was a few kilometres from the hospital. If we met people with a dog, I often asked if Alex could pat the dog and they always responded with great kindness, sometimes putting the dog on his lap. He still couldn't communicate at this stage but he seemed more present at these times. At rehabilitation he learnt to talk and started to become more active. As he became more capable, we used to go to the gym at rehab and play ball or other games.

After six months he came home and we did projects together like building a chook house and a go-cart. I did all the bits that his lack of agility prevented him from doing, but he was in charge of planning and design. We went to therapy sessions together until he could safely go on his own in a taxi. When he got to the point of resuming learning to drive, I spent many hours taking him places where he or I needed to go so that he got the necessary practice.

When he started to study, I tutored him until he was able to grasp the concepts and keep up with the teachers. I found him shared accommodation close to the TAFE because it was too far for him to drive after a day's study with the fatigue that he still suffered. These days he's largely independent and there's very little that I need to do for him.

Alex's cognitive and mobility challenges were overcome with persistence, planning and strategies. Over the long term, experience is helping him overcome his challenges.

Alex's closest friends stood by him and were wonderful in helping him to adjust to normal life. Eventually however, it became obvious to him that they were fairly irresponsible. He had grown past that and needed to move on which was very hard for him, but he made his choice. He is very sociable and has plenty of other/new friends to turn to.

We are very close. We have deeply shared unusual experiences. We know that we can say things that are uncomfortable or maybe hurtful to the other, as we are very certain of the depth of love we share. I know I can rely on Alex when I need emotional support or someone to discuss any thorny personal issues. Alex's motivation is immense and he thinks things through logically. He teaches me to take control of my life when the going is tough. He teaches me that anything is possible and not to dwell on the negative.

Greg

Finding new interests

My accident happened in country Victoria 23 years ago when I was 20. I rolled my ute several times on a gravel road and sustained a severe head injury. I was in a coma for three and a half months.



I'm still learning new ways of doing things. For example, over the past 12 months I have been having therapy to improve my independence, through walking, gardening and cooking.

My accident happened in country Victoria 23 years ago when I was 20. I rolled my ute several times on a gravel road and sustained a severe head injury. I was in a coma for three and a half months.

I'm a massive Collingwood supporter, and when I was still in hospital and had just come out of the coma, some friends arranged to have ruckman Damian Monkhorst visit me. I remember someone saying, "You have a visitor but you'll never guess who". Even though we'd never met, when I saw Damian I shouted out in excitement, "Oh Monkey," like we were best mates! That was in 1990, the year the Magpies beat Essendon in the grand final. I wasn't allowed to be overstimulated because I was recovering from being in a coma, so the news of the win had to be kept

from me for a while. The Collingwood Football Club was fantastic – I had weekly visits from different players, which had a big influence on my recovery. A couple of players even came to my 21st birthday at the Olympia hospital.

The Collingwood Football Club was fantastic – I had weekly visits from different players, which had a big influence on my recovery.

My rehabilitation was long and slow, I had to learn to do everything again, like walking and talking. One of my biggest heartbreaks was losing all my close mates from school. Being in hospital and rehabilitation centres for many years and being away from my community meant we lost touch. They had all moved on with their lives, got jobs and started families. The severity of my brain injury has meant that I wasn't able to return to work or go back to the life I led before the accident.

I've suffered a lot from depression too, over the years. Some of the things I did before my accident was play golf and drum in a band, but my brain injury and mobility issues meant that I couldn't do those things anymore. That was hard to come to terms with. It was especially hard when I lived on my own, as I was

lonely and isolated and day-to-day living was a challenge. My sister Deb has been a real help to me though. She knew I was struggling living on my own, so I moved in with her and it's worked out really well. We share a lot of interests, like singing, and I know she's there for me.

I've had a lot of support since the accident, including teams of health professionals, carers, community groups and my family – my mum and three older sisters. There were times when I struggled to make new friends and re-join the community, but you know – you just need to pick yourself up and look at what you can do and find new interests and friends.

My family are always helping me find new things to keep me active and use my mind. In the early days my mum started me doing kids' jigsaw puzzles, and as I progressed in my recovery I joined a number of community groups, and started making new friends and developing new hobbies.

One of the first new interests I developed after my accident was maintaining bonsai plants, which my mum got me interested in when she bought me my first bonsai tree. My carer arranged for us to go to the Bendigo Bonsai Club and they helped me understand the ancient art of bonsai. Part of the technique is to prune the roots to keep them small. Any plant can be turned into a bonsai and I spend a lot of time looking for different types of plants to use – I gather cuttings from neighbours and

visit the nurseries. I like to collect seeds and nuts and grow plants myself. I am quite adventurous – even pines can be kept looking small, but it takes time and patience to train them. I now have over 60 plants.

I'm still learning new ways of doing things. For example, over the past 12 months I have been having therapy to improve my independence, through walking, gardening and cooking. Using a slow cooker has been a great way for me to unite with my friends and family. The meals always taste great and you can't burn yourself!

At the moment I am planning my summer veggie garden. I am kept busy creating and maintaining my bonsai plants, playing didgeridoo, using my computer, practising and performing magic tricks (I'm the side kick to a magician in Bendigo) and cooking. I love challenging myself and using my brain to play the computer and board games. I also get out and walk my dog using my motorised scooter. I have a King Charles Cavalier named Tarkyn (named after Collingwood player Tarkyn Lockyer), who is great company.

To other injured people just starting their recovery, I would just advise them to be open to finding new interests. Search out clubs and groups that are willing to help you. Get a dog or pet for company. A sense of humour is also important – be prepared to have a laugh at yourself. Check out my photo – I have blonde hair, blue eyes, muscles. Not!



Deb, Greg's sister

Being socially isolated was one of Greg's biggest obstacles, particularly when he lived by himself. Connecting with new friends when you have an acquired brain injury is a challenge. Greg has had very difficult times with depression but with support he has been able to pick himself up and find new things that interest him, and develop his skills and confidence. Getting involved in community groups has helped Greg make good friends.

Our relationship has changed and improved since the accident. I'm 12 years older than Greg – I was starting work when he started school, so we didn't spend much of his childhood together. Now we share a house, many friends and play music together. Moving in with me solved the issue of Greg's isolation and meant he had more room for his interests – plus he could get a dog. Walking his dog using his motorised scooter also gets Greg out into the community. The more he gets out there, the more he gets back.

Despite all the challenges Greg has faced over a long period of time, he has maintained his sense of humour. This is important as it helps to connect with other people. Also Greg is able to get outside his own problems and see that there are other people who need help and support. Helping others is very rewarding for everyone.

Finding new interests

Sport and Recreation Victoria provide Access for All Abilities (AAA) programs. They can help you pursue a range of activities with people who share interests similar to your own in sports or activities such as gardening, arts and crafts, cooking and woodwork.
Phone: 03 9208 3333

Disability Sport & Recreation provides a range of sport and recreational opportunities for people of all ages throughout Victoria.
Phone: 03 9473 0133 or
Web: www.dsr.org.au

You may also wish to contact the **Council of Adult Education (CAE)** who provide learning opportunities to adults through a wide range of programs and services.
Phone: 03 9652 0611 or Toll-free 1800 601 111
Web: www.cae.edu.au

Sam

Looking forward to the future

I was distracted while driving and lost control of my car, sliding it across the road and wrapping it sideways around a tree. I was found unconscious and sustained severe head trauma, and was airlifted to the Alfred Hospital.

I've been told I died four times on the way.

I was 18 when I had my car accident in January 2003. I was distracted while driving and lost control of my car, sliding it across the road and wrapping it sideways around a tree. I was found unconscious and sustained severe head trauma, and was airlifted to the Alfred Hospital. I've been told I died four times on the way.

After about three or four weeks in an induced coma, I was transferred to the Epworth Rehab Centre, where I spent four months with post-traumatic amnesia (PTA). This is basically where the body is awake but the mind needs to restart or just remember everything again. It's different for everybody.

I was in a Craig bed for most of my time in PTA. The Craig bed is a big bed with padded walls to protect the patient from thrashing around and hurting themselves, but I'd still manage to pull out all the drips and things. Vince (my step-dad) brought in a pair of boxing gloves he borrowed from a nearby gym and they put those on my hands of a night time to stop me hurting myself. I still have them.

All the nurses were amazed to see that my mum had put all these photos of my friends and family around the walls of each room I moved into throughout the year in the hospital! They said no-one had ever done that before. The idea was to help my memory when waking up.



I stayed in the rehab centre until just before the end of that year, when I honoured a commitment to my family and walked out of the rehab centre to spend Christmas and New Years with my family and friends.

In January 2004, I was admitted to the Epworth's Transitional Living Centre. That was fantastic. It helped me to develop the skills I needed to live independently, which I was able to do about a year later when I moved into a small unit by myself. Fortunately I still had plenty of support when I needed it, with my mum, Vince and my sisters, who were living just up the road. There was also plenty of other family only a phone call away.

When I was in rehab I took full advantage of everything on offer – the physios, the OTs and all the other professionals. Some people that have an Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) just want to get out of there, which I can fully understand. There were, and certainly still are, lots of down days for me as well, but I knew at the time that I was in the best place to get the support I needed.

Getting back to running was one of my major goals. By 2005, I was able to walk, and I worked hard to build up from there. I joined a running group for people with ABIs, initiated by my physio.

Since having the accident I've had a curiosity about God, but didn't really know how to go about getting into it. Then in 2007 I moved into a unit attached to my parent's new home, so I had my independence and family support at the same time. That meant a whole lot to me. We all went to a local festival, where I met and made a new friend, Simon. As our friendship evolved he told me that he was a Christian. At the time I wasn't really thinking about church, but I accepted Simon's invitation and attended church. I am happy to be counted today as a Christian.

I'm doing some volunteer work at the moment too, which I really enjoy. We provide meals for the homeless and disadvantaged. I talk to the people who come in. They don't have a lot of people who listen to their stories, so I'm all ears.

Occasionally I go to an art class in the mornings. The first painting I did was a small bunch of flowers on a small wooden plate. Mum was unsure if I really painted it. I was previously left handed, but having lost full use of my left side I am still mastering my conversion to a right-hander.

My mum has been my biggest support throughout this journey. I wouldn't have made anything like the progress I have without her. I hope everyone on this ABI roller coaster is blessed with a strong network of supporting and loving people.

Great news! There is life after an ABI – I've got a new partner. I met Hosana about a year ago while volunteering. We started living together not too long after that. Being with Hosana has brought out a whole range of emotions that I had no idea I would ever feel again. I've never been so happy. I'm so lucky to have my Mum and the rest of my family for support, but now, with Hosana, my future is so exciting.

My mum...
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without her.

Sam's biggest supporter – his mum, Chris

The biggest challenge is that you don't know what to expect. My son was lying there and couldn't swallow, talk or walk. He was so emaciated. Everyone used to say, 'It will get better with time', but it's hard to understand that when you're right at the beginning of it and you don't see his condition improving.

The Epworth was incredible. Sam was part of a pilot program (Fast Track) and I can't speak highly enough about the treatment he got there. I did a lot of research myself to try and understand more about ABI and how I could support Sam. I was very active and involved in his rehabilitation, which meant my partner Vince had to take over our coach touring business full-time. That was hard. The nature of the business meant he was away a lot interstate and I would go in to be with Sam for full days in the Epworth. Eventually, we sold the business and moved to Melbourne (from Gippsland) to be closer to Sam.

Sam's first words were "hello Mum". I cried of course! It's been nearly ten years now since the accident and Sam has come so far. He's very determined and he works at it every day. Each night, he still wears the splint to stretch and support his arm which was clenched shut for so long. A lot of other people would have probably stopped wearing it, but he knows that's what's best for his injury.

For a long time, he found it difficult to manage his anger. That was very hard. But now he recognises the triggers and he's able to control it a lot better.

While Sam was in rehab, he broke up with his former girlfriend. That was really tough. He also dealt with the loss of many of his friends who stopped visiting after a while, and got a bit depressed. I wanted him to get another dog for company when he was living on his own. Eventually, we found Moby (a spoodle) and he's now firmly part of our family!



Finding new friends

You may feel isolated after your accident and it's often helpful to form friendships with people in your area. These relationships can help to develop your confidence and allow you to enjoy a wider range of activities.

Community Friend Program

Phone: 03 9385 3222.

Action for Community Living provides opportunities for people with disabilities to live well in the community.

Phone: 03 9489 2999.

Disability Online – DiVine is an online community who provide information, run for and by people with a disability

Phone: 03 9208 3015

Web: www.disability.vic.gov.au



Greg and Deb enjoy a jam session together. Read their story on pages 4-5.

Calling all composers

The TAC is looking to update our on-hold music, and are seeking musical contributions from TAC clients. If you have composed an original piece of work, and would be happy for it to be used on the TAC's telephone system, please send us a demo. Successful applicants will be acknowledged in the first issues of our client newsletters for 2013.

Please note we are seeking instrumental compositions only – no lyrics or vocals please, and music must be original.

Send your demo to Jayde Polwarth by Monday 19th November at the TAC, PO Box 742, Geelong, Vic 3220, and include your name, address and claim number.

Spark Plugged

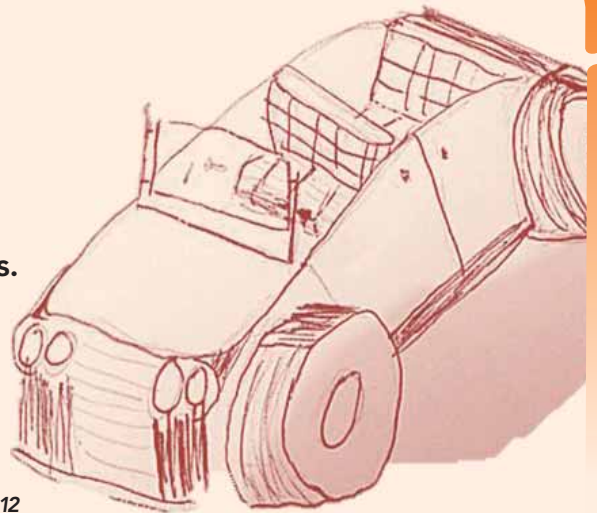
I'm now driving a flashier car in my journey through life.

It's left hand hook,
Open-minded and fun,
Red with heaps of rubber wrapped chrome mags.

The Red makes my life go faster,
The rubber gives me control and a way to slow down,

And the chrome makes me look good.

TAC client Matt Wilson, May 7th 2012



Contact us

Telephone
8.30am to 5.30pm,
Monday to Friday
1300 654 329 (local call)
1800 332 556 (toll-free
outside the Melbourne
metropolitan area)

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