

Cinema Analogy for Life After Acquiring a Brain Injury

Have you ever had to wait in a queue for an over extended period of time, while all you're thinking to yourself was, "man, I wish they had more people working today!" Maybe you have been the someone who was dealing with a large que of irritated people all in a hurry to get done what they need to. If so, you may be able to understand where I'm coming from with this analogy for processing information after a brain injury. Stress is a completely natural human reaction to certain factors surrounding us every day. After a brain injury, your brain is open to new types of stresses that one never experiences before with a healthy, well-functioning brain.

The cinema in this story represents the part of the brain that processes information. When this is working well, there are plenty of staff and the people coming through can be processed quickly, resulting in quick turnover of people being able to do what they came to do and an extraordinarily successful cinema. After a brain injury, this part of the brain is often damaged; hence the one staff member and the series of repercussions that follow.

The customers represent diverse types of information; visual, auditory, smell, touch, and taste, waiting to be processed. So, when there is one clerk doing the work equivalent to one hundred clerks, that clerk is under immense pressure and stress.

Picture this... 100 different people from all over the world, queuing for a once in a lifetime opportunity - a movie premier at the local cinema, where the first in gets first choice in their seating position (online booking is not a thing here). There is going to be some competition to get in as quick as possible. Now, this cinema used to have 100 staff members working here. That means that when events like these used to happen, customers did not wait. The eager movie enthusiasts would just walk straight up to one of the clerks, they would process them and let them through. It was a lovely, easy flowing system that worked so well for everybody involved. The cinema represents me, the brain and the 100 people represent sensory information: vision, sound, touch, smell, and taste.

Due to a series of unfortunate events, the staff have been cut down to 1 clerk, me. The reason that there were as many staff members as customers, was because it is a big process to evaluate and approve each person that comes through. So now, there is a ratio of 1:100 staff to people queuing to get in. Keep in mind, that these 100 people want nothing else in the world but to see this screening. The staff members represent neural pathways, which run throughout the brain, carrying information from one area to another. Processing and sorting the information to send it to the right area that allows me to carry out that particular task.

As time draws closer to the screening of the premier, people start to roll in. The first few people are processed quickly and go straight through and there's no dramas. But after the first 10 people, LB is exhausted and stressed and the que becomes longer and in time, rowdier.

As LB serves the eleventh customer, I hear commotion building in the que of the 89 others, eager to be served as quickly as possible. This increases the stress that I am already under, resulting in immense pressure and sends LB into a spiral of panic, pain, and confusion. Luckily, during LB's early training, he picked up a few coping strategies that he can pull out of his hat in times like these. As LB processes his eleventh customer, he excuses himself for a short period of time and leaves the front counter empty to go out the back, where there are no bright, fluorescent lights, there's no people who are complaining and being noisy, and things are calm, quiet and there is no movement. It is here, that LB can close his eyes, visualise walking in the middle of a quaint rainforest, taking in all the soothing sounds that nature produces, while focusing on some deep, diaphragmatic breathing. After two minutes of focused attention purely on his breath and blocking out the environmental factors, the cognitive stress has lowered, and LB's autonomic nervous system is much calmer, and he feels relaxed. He feels like a completely different brain in the best kind of way. As he heads back out to finish processing the eleventh customer, LB is greeted with an agitated crowd, as they can't believe that he is the only person working here and he just took a break - how dare he! Doesn't he know what we are here to see!

LB continues to process each customer, and he does it well. There are quite a few rude customers, who continue to try to upset LB with their rude comments and remarks. All this emotional stress does take its toll, but he is able to continue the deep breathing and focus on what he needs to do to complete the job. Lb has developed an incredible approach towards life, understanding that how others act is out of his control. What is in his control though, is how he chooses to react to them. As time goes on, I continue to address such behaviours with acknowledgement and compassion. Sometimes, this means that I cannot talk to some of the customers, as all my attention is on my

breathing to keep my autonomic nervous system from skyrocketing to the flight or fight state. This handles the stress caused by the rest of the people in the queue and I need to focus a certain amount of my attention on the processing of each customer - the job that I am here to do. There are some empathising customers who are simply amazed and stunned by how well LB can manage the intense environmental factors, along with the challenging job that he seems to be able to achieve with no worries whatsoever.

It gets to the point where LB is used to the bickering, the complaining, the rudeness of the people in the queue. That's the new normal, and he can deal with it all at a mastery level. LB can get on with processing each customer, occasionally he will pop into the back to step away from the noise and business to give himself a quick break.

Six years ago, LB had his first experience of working alone, under such intense circumstances, resulting in learning that if he did not have a break, then he would end up becoming so irritated towards the customers, which then can become aggressive behaviour, rudeness, and regretful choices. Since that incident, LB has been working hard every day to manage his own stresses. There have been others at different cinemas around the world who have not been able to implement such effective strategies and they have had extremely challenging times completing their job. Hell, some even quit in the worst imaginable ways possible.

LB continues to turn up to his job every day, as there are always people who want to see a movie and he makes that possible for them. When there were 99 other people working with LB, his workload was much smaller, and he had the energy after work to hang out with friends or family and do plenty of activities that he enjoyed. These days, LB sleeps during his breaks just to make it through the day. When he gets home, exhaustion riddles every cell in his body. The sensory world affects the muscles in his head, neck, and shoulders in a way that it feels like he has been physically injured. There are special occasions when he can really push himself to socialise, go shopping or even watch some T.V. But there is always a price to pay afterwards.

There is a beautiful online community where LB can meet other altered brains, in a similar situation and discuss their own struggles and swap stories that to anyone who hasn't experienced, is an awfully hard concept to even imagine. But thankfully, by sharing their different ideas about managing their own unique circumstances, LB and others can learn from each other and help each other get through some of those days, that to anyone else wonders how the hell someone could survive, let alone thrive under those circumstances.