

We are all at Risk: Brain Injury Awareness

by Francene Gillis, Educator and Brain Injury Advocate

According to Dr. Charles Tator, director of the Canadian Concussion Centre, and renowned neurologist and concussion expert, more than 400,000 Canadians sustain a concussion each year. The Universal Rehabilitation Service Agency (URSA) reports that one Canadian experiences a brain injury every three minutes.

June is Brain Injury Awareness Month, an ideal time to increase understanding of this often misunderstood and invisible injury, one that can have life-altering consequences. A concussion can occur in an instant: a misstep, a fall on black ice, or an unexpected accident. In those moments, everything changes, especially when the brain is involved.

On February 1, 2016, I slipped and fell, striking the back of my head twice. At the time, I had no idea that the fall would end a teaching career I loved and begin a long journey of confusion, challenges, and frustration. In the days, weeks, and months that followed, unexplained symptoms emerged. Teaching demands constant multitasking, concentration, and quick decision-making, skills that became increasingly difficult to manage in a classroom of 30 students. I was devastated.

For four months, I struggled to find specialized care. When I finally connected with concussion specialist Dr. David Cudmore, I was diagnosed with a mild traumatic brain injury and whiplash, which evolved into post-concussion syndrome (PCS). Sadly, URSA estimates that 15–30 per cent of people who sustain a concussion go on to experience PCS.

What do you know about concussions? Test your knowledge:

1. What is a concussion?
2. What is a midline shift?
3. Does a concussion show up on an X-ray or CAT scan?
4. What is PTVS?
5. What are the three most common symptoms of a concussion?
6. How many symptoms can a person have with a brain injury?
7. How long can a concussion last?
8. What is flooding?
9. What is neuroplasticity?
10. What medical test diagnoses a concussion?
11. What is Second Impact Syndrome (SIS)?

Understanding SIS is particularly important for teachers, coaches, and parents. SIS occurs when a second concussion is

sustained before the brain has fully healed from the first. Although rare, the consequences can be catastrophic, including death.

One tragic example is that of 17-year-old Ottawa rugby player Rowan Stringer. During a tournament in May 2013, she suffered a head injury in her first game and suspected a concussion but confided in only one friend. After sustaining another head injury in a subsequent game, she died from Second Impact Syndrome. While rare, SIS is real.

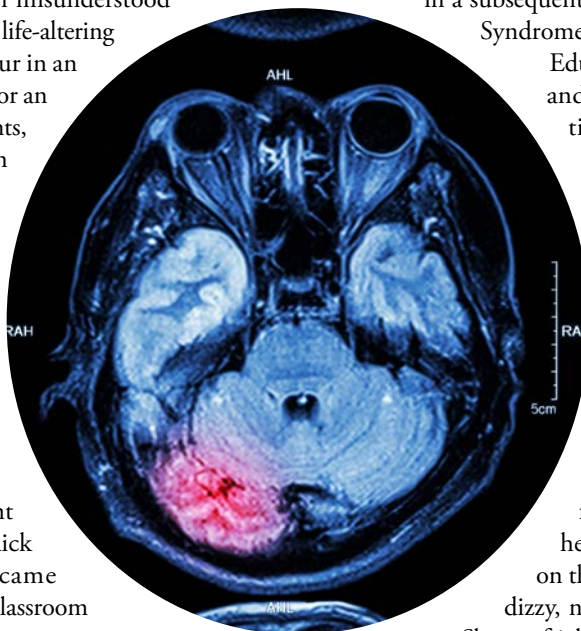
Educators need training on concussions and other brain injuries as proper and timely treatment is crucial. Schools should have clear protocols to respond to accidents and injuries that occur on school grounds. People with concussions are often unaware at the time of their injury, as the symptoms may only start days or weeks later.

Consider this case of a preteen who slipped and fell while walking with her class to the arena during Winter Carnival. She remembered falling but did not recall hitting her head. At the rink, her teacher put her on the ice to play broomball. She soon felt dizzy, nauseated, and developed a headache.

She was frightened because she had lost her memory of the entire morning. At the hospital, the doctor said she had a concussion and sent her home with old-school suggestions, which were not very helpful. Had she fallen and hit her head playing broomball, matters could have been much more serious.

Educators need to know that a concussion can occur even when the head does not seem to be affected. According to Dr. Charles Tator, a concussion can occur without an actual hit, the injury occurs when the brain jiggles rapidly back and forth inside the skull. Brain function remains a mystery, but research in the last decade has discovered new and valuable information. A concussion is a brain injury we should never take lightly. People can carry the damage for the rest of their lives. Statistics suggest that one in 10 of you will know someone who will suffer a brain injury this year.

I lost my identity when I fell. A wife, mother, educator for 30 years, an author, columnist, and writer for 25 years, who was I after my injury? I felt worthless. My entire world shrank, and I could not function in my home. Suddenly disabled, I felt like I was of no use to anyone. With treatment, therapy, and support, I gradually rebuilt my life and turned my shortfalls around and regained purpose. Today my purpose is to empower anyone



affected by a brain injury so they do not feel as lost, alone, and helpless as I did. Knowing how to get immediate help is the first line of defense.

My background as a teacher and professional writer had me asking questions and digging for answers. At my occupational therapist's suggestion, I began keeping a journal which evolved into notes to help friends, and a resource to help me. Eventually a manuscript containing the information I wish I had received when I was first injured resulted in *Where Did I Go?*, a memoir and practical resource published by OC Publishing on June 22, 2025.

The need for education remains significant. According to a February 2025 Canadian government study, *What Canadians Know About Concussions*, one in two Canadians has limited knowledge about concussions, one in four does not know how to treat one, 85 per cent cannot identify the best ways to treat a concussion, and only four in 19, know how to find information.

Since my fall, I have learned an incredible amount, because I was desperate to get back to my classroom. I was also determined to overcome the disabling symptoms that were holding me back from life: nausea, dizziness, flooding, extreme fatigue, anxiety, confusion, forgetfulness, headaches, and cognitive, visual, and vestibular difficulties.

I could not go outside—the sun was far too bright. Conversations were difficult to follow. When I tried to speak, I often substituted incorrect words that sounded similar. I stuttered, and if I slowed down, words were painstakingly hard to retrieve and pronounce.

For months I did not know where or how to get the proper help. Others in my community who had experienced a head injury reached out to me and shared their stories; this made me feel understood. But no two brain injuries are the same. Specialists helped me understand that what I was experiencing was real. My emotions were all over the place. For years I had nightmares of falling, being fired, hitting my head, waking up in panic.

Those of who sustain brain injuries, may never be who we were before, but we can adapt and recreate ourselves. It is ultimately up to us to learn how to navigate the complex world of brain injuries and fight to recover. With the right supports it is possible to relearn skills, retrain the brain, and even come out better. However, we need knowledgeable support.

There is so much more that could be said. My hope is that if you, a loved one, or someone you know sustains a head injury, you will have a better understanding of what to do and where to get qualified help. Not every medical professional who says they know what to do, has specialized training. Try to get referrals from others who have lived experience. Most importantly, don't allow anyone tell your symptoms are "all in your head." As Dr. Charles Tator has clarified that popular misnomer, concussion symptoms are real.

If you know someone who is recovering from a brain injury, encourage them to find something of interest and pursue it. Without a renewed purpose, it is easy to become isolated and discouraged. Get out of the house, carefully expose yourself to triggers until symptoms subside, and engage in light exercise. Keep a daily record of symptoms and activities. Early in my recovery, I did too much, which left me exhausted and depleted. Pay attention to what your brain is saying. Recovery unfolds on

the brain's time, not our own.

If there is one key takeaway, it is this: the sooner a person receives treatment from a qualified concussion specialist, the better the chances of a faster and more complete recovery. The complexity of the brain and its control over all body systems necessitates a multidisciplinary approach for optimal therapies and treatments.

Where Did I Go? A Memoir Plus is an excellent resource for therapists, teachers, coaches, concussion clinicians, families, and those suffering from a brain injury. It features eight stories of remarkable people overcoming trauma and unexpected challenges. An education and awareness section answers questions, and a treatment section includes multidisciplinary suggestions, along with an extensive resource guide.

I incorporated hundreds of visuals, infographics, and large-print text, as reading can be difficult for those with cognitive challenges. It is imperative we learn about brain injuries, know what to do, when, and where to get help, as it makes the difference between successful recovery and a continual downhill slide.

One reader shared: "It's an incredible story, reading the words of how you felt. As a mom, I wish this had been available six years ago. Congratulations. Great read. Very well-articulated and well-written. My heart hurts that you had to endure this at the end of your teaching career, or at all! Wish I had this as a resource. I think you will help a ton of people." — Gail Promponas, Cape Cod, Ma.

As Dr. Charles Tator reminds us, "Concussion is a clinical diagnosis. There is no biomarker. The earlier patients receive treatment, the better off they will be." And as Dr. Camelia Tartaglia, Co-Director of the Canadian Concussion Centre, notes: "With education and the knowledge that it could happen to you, you can do more to protect yourself."

May we educate and empower ourselves and others, as brain injury is but a fall, bump, or accident away.

Francene Gillis is a wife, mother, educator, author, and longtime columnist with the Inverness Oran. Over a 30+-year career, she taught high school English, worked as a consultant with the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and worked in adult literacy and education. She has also facilitated educational workshops across Canada and worked with national education organizations.

Following a life-changing brain injury in 2016, she is now an advocate for people with brain injuries. Her memoir, Where Did I Go?, shares her recovery journey and raises awareness about concussion and brain injury. Her third book, And Momma Cried, a creative nonfiction account of a Nova Scotia family during the Second World War, is scheduled for release in the fall of 2026.

Discover more at gillis@live.com, <https://www.francenegillis.ca> or <https://www.facebook.com/francenegillis1>. Where Did I Go? A Memoir Plus is available through the author, on Amazon, at Bookmark II, and Dartmouth Book Exchange in Halifax, The Curious Cat & Five to a Dollar, Antigonish, and through local outlets in Inverness County.