

**Organiser:** Head First

**Conference:** "Aiming Higher, Expanding Horizons: What Does It Take to Thrive in brain injury? (An inquiry into the impact of positive attitudes and approaches on outcomes)"

**Date:** 16<sup>th</sup> May 2013

**Venue:** Westminster Central Hall, London

This Head First conference was aimed at professionals working in the field of brain injury and also people who had sustained a brain injury or who had an interest in this area. It was a large conference; the delegate sheet showed that many professionals of all disciplines were in attendance.

The first speaker of the day was Jaxx Cave. Jaxx was working within a London local authority commissioning team, managing a large budget, when she was knocked down on her way home from work and sustained a catastrophic brain injury. Jaxx gave an incredibly inspirational talk about her experience of having sustained a brain injury and her recovery so far. Jaxx's talk was really interesting as she was able to talk first hand of the support she sustained from two London hospitals and more latterly her Case Manager, Solicitor and Psychologist. She talked of what had been important to her and the huge role her mother and friends played (and continue to play) in her recovery and setting out her new life. Her personal account was enlightening and humorous and showed how her positive attitude had enabled her to start her new life, with support around her. Whilst talking you could hear a pin drop as every person in the room listened intently to her story, if ever there was an inspirational speaker needed on the processes and strains a person goes through after sustaining an injury then Jaxx is it. Jaxx wish to be an ambassador for people with brain injury, I think, would be a welcome step forward.

Jaxx was followed by Professional Jonathan Evans who talked about his work within the University of Glasgow and the study that he and his team are starting to undertake about positive psychology and the effects following brain injury. As the study is just beginning now there were no results to be shared, however he was able to describe the thinking behind the study and how other results and studies have shown the important of positive psychology for those having sustained an injury.

Dr Trevor Powell has worked in Berkshire NHS Trust for many years, working with people having sustained a traumatic brain injury. His presentation discussed his findings that the potential for post traumatic growth, that is a positive psychological change, increases over time and that a person eleven years after the injury shows more growth than a person eighteen months down the road. Interesting there are common features in people sustaining growth such as a positive mental attitude and some kind of faith, even if not actually an organised religion.

Dr Tara Rado gave a presentation on the neuroscience behind emotion and how this relates to brain injury and how important the need for a positive attitude and to be able to reassess goals is when moving on

after an injury. This was the real science part of the day and I felt it was a lot to take in! Dr Rado's extensive experience of working closely with people, such as Jaxx Cave, has enabled her to track the progress of how emotions play such a strong part in the rehabilitation following an injury.

After lunch we were treated to a presentation from Janine Heritage who works for Head First. I've seen that often this is a difficult slot to have as people are not back in the zone of concentrating but Janine was able to pitch her presentation so it was engaging and fun. She talked about the need to support people and value their experience and diversity.

Howard Jackson works in a rehabilitation unit and talked in depth about the helpfulness of good, supportive rehabilitation with dedicated workers who have the time, professionalism and compassion to work alongside people who have sustained a brain injury. He talked of the importance of being able to relate to people on their own level and working with people towards an agreed, shared outcome.

I thought this event was really well put together; there were two speakers for me which shone out and helped me understand the importance of the work we're doing with people with brain injuries. Each speaker gave interesting presentations which showed their commitment to their area of specialism or their history. There was a lot of information to take in, but the post-conference website with full recordings of each presentation meant that I could re-watch and reflect on the information I'd heard. There was a strong message of the need for positivity both in the way we approach our work and in encouraging people to keep sight of the positives and to aim for goals, however small they may seem.

Westminster Central Hall was a fantastic venue for the conference. If I had one negative comment about a day filled with positives it would be that there was no-where to eat lunch so people had to sit on the floor. This didn't distract from the day though and it was an excellent opportunity to speak with exhibitors, listen to experts on brain injury and network with people attending the day. I would recommend Head First conferences if this event is of their usual standard.

I would like to thank BISWG for their kind agreement to award me a bursary to attend this event. The whole process of applying and being accepted has been really straightforward and easy. Thank you.