

SILVER LEARNINGS

Practical Wisdom for Living with Brain Injury

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Disclaimer: This book references the author's personal experience living with brain injury. The author is not a medical or mental health professional. This book is not a substitute for health advice from a qualified professional. Readers should consult their own practitioners.

This excerpt contains the following sections from the print version of *Silver Learnings: Practical Wisdom for Living with Brain Injury*:

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For ways to purchase the full book, please visit StarrSpeakerAuthor.com

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INTRODUCTION

Silver Threads

July 6th, 1999, the day of my brain injury, was a defining milestone.

July 6th, 2024 marked another milestone. My silver anniversary. Twenty-five years of living with brain injury.

Twenty-five years is a long time. Long enough to grieve and to find joy again. Long enough to struggle, to grow, and to gather wisdom. Long enough to discover that living well with brain injury isn't about returning to who I was; it's about becoming who I am now.

So, in honor of my twenty-five years, I'm sharing twenty-five lessons about living with brain injury—silver threads drawn from the fabric of my journey. These lessons began as a conference speech. Now I've expanded them into this book.

These silver learnings offer valuable insights, tested strategies, and practical wisdom with relevance for brain injury survivors, caregivers, and professionals.

The twenty-five lessons are grouped into five categories:

- Coping with Brain Injury
- Hard Truths
- Helpful Mindsets
- Accepting a New Self
- Thriving with Brain Injury

These categories not only help you navigate this book. They also reflect the broader process of navigating change, especially the kind we never asked for or expected.

Brain injury is a milestone that changes not only the direction of our lives, but more deeply, who we are as people. In the face of that unwelcome change, we gradually learn strategies to cope. We come face-to-face with hard truths we wish we could avoid. We discover that how we think—about ourselves, our injury, and our path forward—matters. And even though it may seem impossible at first, we begin to understand it is possible to come to terms with a changed life and to slowly build a meaningful new one.

This process doesn't move in a straight line; it is a spiral path that twists and turns. Sometimes we move forward,

sometimes we loop backward, and sometimes we stand still. The lessons in this book honor that spiral path.

The brain injury journey will be different for each of us. These lessons are meant to meet you wherever you are on your path, offering encouragement, insight, and support as you navigate your way forward.

If you're a brain injury survivor reading this, I hope these hard-won lessons speak to your experience and help make the path ahead a little easier.

If you're a caregiver, I hope these lessons provide a window into pieces of your loved one's journey and open the door to meaningful conversations.

If you're a brain injury professional, I hope these lessons offer survivor-earned wisdom you can carry into your work, complementing your clinical knowledge and care.

However you engage with this book, I hope you find strength, meaning, and hope within it.

How to Read Silver Learnings

This book is written and formatted with brain injury survivors in mind. Paragraphs and chapters are short, since it can be hard to focus on long stretches of text. The print is larger than average, with extra spaces between paragraphs, to help reduce the overwhelmed feeling that reading can sometimes bring. I made these design choices to help make this book more accessible for brain injury survivors.

Each chapter stands on its own, so you can read them in any order. Choose the lessons most meaningful to you. This format also honors the memory challenges that many of us cope with. You don't need to remember earlier chapters to understand later ones. I designed this book to be flexible, so you can use it in whatever way best supports your journey.

At the end of each chapter, you'll find individual questions and an action item to help you reflect, explore, and apply the key ideas from the lesson to your own experience. There are also group discussion questions designed for brain injury support groups.

Silver Learnings is not a book of easy answers or quick solutions, because brain injury doesn't work that way.

But it is a book of hope. A book of wisdom. A book of practical advice from someone who has lived the journey.

Wherever you are on this path, I am honored to walk alongside you, and I hope my silver learnings inspire you to gradually notice and gather your own.

3.

Learn When to Push and When to Pace



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There are times in our brain injury journey when we have to push, because there's a mountain ahead for us to climb. Then, there are times when we need to pace, in order to recover from climbing that mountain.

Coping with brain injury means walking a fine line between pushing and pacing. Both are important tools for managing our lives and our energy levels.

During the early months and years after brain injury, handling the basics of life can be a steep climb. We may need to relearn how to take care of ourselves, how to support ourselves or our families, how to manage tasks at home, and how to socialize with friends. We may spend a lot of time in a variety of medical settings. All of that requires an enormous amount of push.

The truth is, to move forward after brain injury, some pushing will be necessary. To recover as much as possible, it's important to do the work of rehabilitation, to attempt new things, to take calculated risks, and to push our boundaries.

In other words, we have to be willing to climb the mountain.

However, there is also a real danger in pushing too much, too hard, and too fast, in ways our brains can't tolerate. That leads to falling off the mountain.

Too much time spent pushing is a recipe for brain overwhelm and overload. It may take us hours, days, or weeks to recover our energy.

Emotionally, too much pushing can leave us feeling broken, bruised, and defeated. This has happened to me many times over the years.

That's why pacing is just as important as pushing.

Pace recognizes that rest and recovery are necessary to balance out push.

Pace offers us time for reflection. When we get to know our new selves, we learn how much we can do and what our brains can handle.

Pace encourages us to pay attention to our internal battery. It's important to stop before our energy is completely depleted, and we're exhausted and overwhelmed for days.

However, just as there is danger in spending too much time in push, there is also danger in spending too much time in pace.

Too much time in pace can lead to giving up, to stagnating, to not trying new things, to not leaving the house, to not taking risks, and to believing where we are now is where we will always be.

How can we balance push and pace?

Because I struggle with pacing, that's what I had to focus more on. For me, push takes care of itself; I always push. I often had trouble recognizing when to stop pushing. (I still do sometimes.)

My brain injury rehab therapists modeled pacing for me. One of the most profound examples occurred one day when I arrived at the brain injury program and found all my therapists waiting for me in the treatment room. They told me they were cancelling half my therapy schedule, because it was too much for my brain. I cried with relief. I had been struggling, but I didn't know what to do. I had been trying to push, when I needed to pace.

My therapists helped me learn to recognize the signs that I need to pace. These signs are still true for me today.

I need to pace when:

- activities I'm attempting tire me into the next day
- the meal planning and cooking strategies I've mastered fall apart
- I constantly feel pressure in my head
- I get confused a lot
- I cry easily over nothing

Knowing when to pace comes down to observation, which helps us get to know ourselves and our brains.

Knowing when to pace is also about structure.

It can be difficult for me to recognize when to pace, because my brain lies to me about how much I can do. Therefore, pacing is built into the structure of my life in a variety of ways.

I enter every activity on my schedule, including meal and rest times. That makes it less likely I'll overschedule myself.

I generally schedule one activity in the morning and one in the afternoon. I try to be out of the house either in the morning or in the afternoon.

If I know an activity will be extra brain tiring, it will be the only event on my schedule that day, because it's likely I will need to rest for the remainder of the day.

Every week, there are days in my schedule with nothing planned, to allow time for my brain to recover.

I use a 10-point brain scale to assess my fatigue throughout the day. When I'm a 5 on the scale, I've learned that even though my brain will be telling me to push, I am starting to struggle. I just don't realize it. My brain lies to me when I'm a 5 on the scale. Therefore, 5 means I stop and rest, even though I don't want to or think I need to.

Over the years, I've developed guidelines for how often I can do activities, based on how long it takes me to recover from them. For example, hosting a big holiday dinner takes me several days to a week to fully recover from. Therefore, I only host holidays occasionally. The recovery cost is too high for me to do a lot of them. In contrast, going out to lunch with friends generally tires me for a few hours afterward, so it's something I can do more often.

I've found when I pace well, my brain energy stays more consistent. My motto is, *It's not a race; it's a pace.*

All those strategies may make it seem like I've perfected pacing. I have not. I still have a brain injury, and I still sometimes overestimate what I can do.

Finding the balance between pushing and pacing is an ongoing challenge for all of us. It's easy to fall off the mountain from pushing too much or to languish too long on the couch from pacing too much. All we can do each day is our best, to continue to walk the tight rope, and to give ourselves grace when we stumble.

Making It Your Own: Applying Silver Learnings

Use this space to reflect on how you manage your energy after brain injury. The questions and action item below are designed to help you connect your experience to the key ideas from this lesson: knowing when to push or pace, recognizing patterns in activity levels, and using structure to keep daily life manageable.

Section 1: Individual Reflection Questions

- Do I tend to push too far or pace too long?
- What signs does my body or brain give me when I've pushed too far or paced too long?
- Who helps me notice when I've pushed or paced too much? Do I accept what they tell me?

Section 2: Group Discussion Questions

- What are some ways you challenge yourself during a day or week (pushing)?

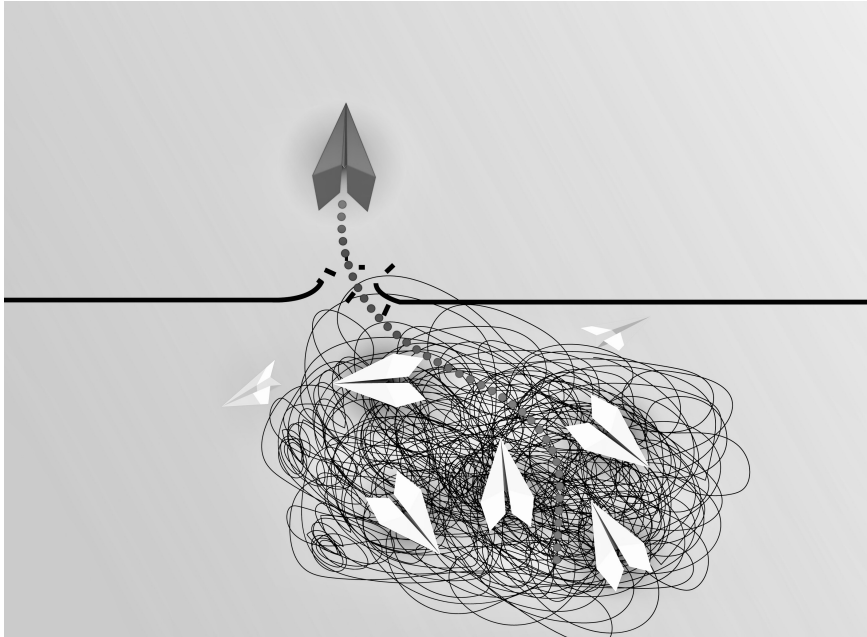
- What are some ways you build rest and recovery into your schedule (pacing)?
- What are the consequences to your life when you push too much? When you pace too much?

Section 3: Action Item—Suggestion for a Next Step after Reading Lesson 3

- Try a Pacing Practice
 - Choose one small pacing strategy to test this week. Some possibilities could be:
 - Taking a short rest before you feel tired
 - Scheduling fewer activities in one day
 - Adding a day with nothing planned to your calendar
 - Try the strategy to see if it helps your brain feel more balanced or rested.

17.

What Can You Do? Find Something the New You is Good At



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Since my brain injury, I

- Can't work full-time anymore
- Can't be a teacher the way I used to be
- Can't be a musician
- Can't always think clearly or find the words I want to say
- Can't be upright for more than a few hours at a time

- Can't tolerate sound or bright lights
- Can't drive very far or travel long distances on my own

I could list more of my brain injury can'ts, but I think I've included enough to make my point, and I would imagine you're tired of reading them.

Can't, can't, can't, can't, can't. How did you feel reading that long list of things I can't do? I felt depressed, disheartened, weighted down, and powerless.

Yes, it is true that the all-encompassing nature of brain injury fills our lives with numerous can'ts. Many are out of our control, and we are unable to change them, no matter how much we want to. We get to grieve those losses.

As we just experienced, it's easy to get bogged down in all those can'ts. If we live our lives focused mostly on everything we can no longer do, we will stay stuck, like the paper airplanes in the picture on the previous page.

Changing our focus from can't to can is a strategy that can help us break free and rise into a new life. Changing our focus from can't to can helps us to accept our new selves.

Let's try that strategy out and flip the script from can't to can on a couple of my earlier statements.

It is true; I can't work a full-time job. However, I can volunteer to help other survivors. I can serve on brain injury committees. I can make a difference.

It is true; I can't perform as a musician anymore. However, I can now listen to music again. I can now go to concerts again. I can use my background as a musician to influence the flow and rhythm of my writing and speaking.

As you read the can's, how do you feel now? I feel inspired, motivated, and hopeful. That's the power of flipping our focus from can't to can.

When we focus on what we can do, we transform from being powerless and trapped by circumstance to being powerful and action oriented. Self-acceptance grows as we figure out what we're good at now.

Given the magnitude of losses we cope with after brain injury, it's easy to believe we are not good at anything anymore. That was not true for me, and it is not true for you.

Our new selves have talents, ones that may be different from our old selves. I discovered my new self was good at crafts, something I had never done before and had no interest in pre-brain injury.

We may find ourselves using previous skills in new ways after brain injury. I am still a teacher. I still think like an educator. That mindset influences how I write and how I organize my speeches.

I encourage you to make a list of what you can do. Write down as many things as you can think of. It doesn't matter how small or trivial the items on the list may seem. Notice what brings forth an emotion, what sparks your interest, what piques your curiosity. These are clues that can help you find what you're good at now.

As we break free from our can'ts and focus on our can's, we have the chance to rise into our new selves and our new lives.

Making It Your Own: Applying Silver Learnings

This reflection section is about shifting focus from what you can't do to what you can do. The questions and action item below are designed to help you connect your experience to the key ideas from this lesson: acknowledging limitations, identifying abilities, and building a new sense of self.

Section 1: Individual Reflection Questions

- What is something I can't do since my brain injury that has been difficult for me to accept?
- What is something I can do now—either in the same way or a different way?
- Have I discovered any new interests or skills since my brain injury?

Section 2: Group Discussion Questions

- How do you shift your focus from what you can't do to what you can do?

- How has your definition of success changed since your brain injury?
- What qualities or strengths do you value in yourself since your brain injury?

Section 3: Action Item—Suggestion for a Next Step after Reading Lesson 17

- Try a Can Time
 - Pick a morning or afternoon to focus on what you can do.
 - For a few hours (or as long as you're able to), briefly jot down anything, big or small, you are able to do.
For example:
 - I made breakfast/lunch
 - I checked my email
 - I called a friend
 - I rested when I needed to
 - Later, reflect on your list.
 - Did anything surprise me?
 - Did I learn anything about myself?

About the Author

Carole J. Starr, M.S., is a brain injury survivor, national keynote speaker, author, group leader, and mentor. Before her injury, Carole was building a career as an educator and performing as an amateur violinist and singer.

A car accident in 1999 changed everything. Carole had to give up her profession and her hobbies. In the years that followed, she grieved the loss of her old life and identity. Slowly and with support, she began to rebuild by focusing on what she *could* do. Step by step, she created a new life and a new purpose.

Today, Carole uses her lived experience to educate, advocate, and support others living with brain injury. She is the author of *To Root & To Rise: Accepting Brain Injury* and *Silver Learnings: Practical Wisdom for Living with Brain Injury*. Carole presents at brain injury conferences across the country, facilitates a brain injury support group, and has held leadership roles in state and national brain injury groups.

Through her writing, speaking, and leadership, Carole has found a new way to be a teacher. She is committed to making a difference and helping others find strength, meaning, and hope after brain injury.

Visit StarrSpeakerAuthor.com to contact Carole, read excerpts from her books, and watch videos of her speeches.