Toronto abi Network conference 2026
Connecting • Learning • Inspiring

2026 Conference Program Day 1

Day 1: Thursday October 29, 2026 | Marriott Downtown at CF Toronto Eaton Centre

07:30 – 08:30	In Person Registration & Breakfast (Grand Ballroom Foyer)
08:30 – 08:45	**Opening Remarks** (Grand Ballroom)

Keynote Address | Dr. Carolyn Lemsky

08:45 – 09:45 **Grand Ballroom**	**What If They're Not Ready Yet? Practical Approaches to Substance Use After Brain Injury** **Dr. Carolyn Lemsky,** Ph.D., C. Psych, ABPP-CN, C-CAT (MB) Neuropsychologist and Clinical Director, Community Head Injury Resource Services (CHIRS) Nearly half of all people who are hospitalized after a brain injury have a history of substance misuse. Without intervention, most will return to their pre-injury pattern of use within a year or two after injury—sooner when the injury is milder. A substantial portion of people who had been in recovery for their substance use disorder pre-injury will see a resurgence of their addictions. About 20 percent will develop entirely new problems. Integrated care for substance use and brain injury is the gold standard for care. But what do you do when that seems out of reach? How do you support clients who are not ready to address problems with substance use? This session will provide clinicians with steps they can take to expand their comfort and capacity to intervene with people who continue to use substances. Key concepts will include how to exploit existing expertise, using harm reduction principles in clinical settings, supporting addictions care and making referrals that stick
09:45 – 10:15	PIA & OBIA Awards of Excellence in Brain Injury Rehabilitation Presentation (Grand Ballroom)
10:15 – 10:45	Morning Break and Sponsor Exhibit Viewing (Grand Ballroom Foyer)
10:40 – 10:45	Transition to Concurrent Sessions

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Concurrent #1
The following three sessions will run concurrently from 10: 45 – 11:30. Select one session to attend

10:45 – 11:30
Session A
Grand Ballroom

Improving Staff Comfort and Skill in Managing Challenging Behaviour after Brain Injury

Lynn Renton, BScOT,
Coordinator, Nova Scotia Health ABI Provincial Network, Nova Scotia Health Acquired Brain Injury Program

Managing behaviours of concern following acquired brain injury can be challenging for both patients and healthcare providers, particularly in rehabilitation settings. This presentation will highlight a quality improvement initiative implemented on a tertiary inpatient brain injury rehabilitation unit to enhance staff knowledge, confidence, and skills in behaviour care planning. Attendees will learn how a collaborative, interdisciplinary, and trauma-informed approach—supported by data collection, targeted education, and continuous quality improvement—led to meaningful improvements in staff competence and the delivery of person-centred care for individuals with complex behavioural needs.

10:45 – 11:30
Session B
Bay

Can Caregiving get E.A.S.I.E.R? Recommendations from a Review of Caregiver Outcomes and Interventions

Arman Ali, MPH
Research Associate, KITE Research Institute, Toronto Rehabilitation Institute, University Health Network
Judith Gargaro, BSc, Med
Toronto Rehabilitation Institute, University Health Network
Jackie Quemby
Ruth Wilcok, RP
Chief Executive Officer of the Ontario Brain Injury Association (OBIA)

Caring for a person with an acquired brain injury (ABI) can have profound emotional, social, and financial impacts on caregivers, yet their needs often remain underrecognized. This presentation will share findings from a comprehensive knowledge synthesis and caregiver engagement project that examined the current state of caregiver outcomes and support interventions. Participants will explore the evidence behind effective psychosocial supports, learn about the novel E.A.S.I.E.R. framework (Empowerment, Advocacy, Support, Improvement, Education, and Research), and discuss practical recommendations for improving caregiver well-being through policy, education, healthcare system changes, and person-centred support across the continuum of care.

10:45 – 11:30
Session C
York AB

Beyond the Diagnosis: Legal Perspectives on Intimate Partner Violence, Addiction and Catastrophic Impairment

Charles Jung, Partner, Oatley Vigmond LLP
William Harding, Partner, McLeish Orlando Lawyers LLP
Michael Bennett, Partner, Thomson Rogers LLP

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Understanding the impact of acquired brain injury (ABI) on social functioning raises complex questions for healthcare providers and legal professionals. This presentation will explore the legal dimensions of intimate partner violence, substance use and addiction, and catastrophic impairment. Participants will examine developments concerning the intimate partner violence tort, consider the implications of addiction for personal injury claims, and explore catastrophic impairment under Criterion 8 through Chapter 14 of the AMA Guides and recent License Appeal Tribunal decisions. The session will highlight the role of clinical observations and documentation in demonstrating functional impairment, with practical discussion and audience questions connecting these legal issues to everyday rehabilitation practice.

11:30 – 11:40 Transition Time

Concurrent #2
The following three sessions will run concurrently from 11: 40 – 12:25. Select one session to attend.

11:40 – 12:25
Session A
Grand Ballroom

When Recovery Stalls: Identity Disruption as a Nervous System Process in ABI Rehabilitation

Irina Valentin, PhD, C.Psych. Neuropsychologist / Clinical Psychologist / School Psychologist, Valentin Psychology Professional Corp.

Many individuals recovering from acquired brain injury (ABI) demonstrate measurable cognitive improvements yet continue to experience challenges with motivation, self-direction, emotional regulation, relationships, and meaningful participation in daily life. This presentation will introduce the concept of identity disruption as an important and often overlooked contributor to persistent functional difficulties following ABI, extending beyond traditional symptom-focused models of recovery. Drawing from neuropsychology, polyvagal theory, and trauma-informed care, participants will explore identity as a multi-level nervous system process and learn practical assessment and intervention approaches to support recovery across the lifespan. Through clinical examples, the session will highlight a four-stage recovery pathway—stabilize, re-anchor, integrate, and reinstate—and provide interdisciplinary strategies to help clinicians better recognize and address identity-level challenges in ABI rehabilitation.

11:40 – 12:25
Session B
Bay

From Survival Mode to Values-Based Living: Acceptance and Commitment Training for ABI Caregivers

Andrea Alves, OT (Reg ON), Occupational Therapist, Community Head Injury Resource Services (CHIRS)

Benjamin Promane, MSW, RSW - Registered Social Worker, CHIRS

Caregiving for a loved one with moderate to severe acquired brain injury (ABI) often involves profound life changes, including grief, shifting identities, emotional distress, and the ongoing challenge of balancing personal well-being with caregiving responsibilities. This presentation will introduce the Acceptance and Commitment Training (ACT) for Families Workshop, a caregiver-focused intervention designed to build psychological flexibility, resilience, and values-based living through experiential, skills-based learning. Participants will explore how ACT principles can support caregiver mental health, hear directly from caregiver participants about their experiences

applying these strategies, and learn from early program evaluation findings. The session will also highlight the importance of co-designing caregiver programs, incorporating feedback, and developing sustainable community-based supports that empower caregivers beyond survival mode toward meaningful and values-driven lives.

11:40 – 12:25
Session C
York AB

The Toronto Concussion Study: Fatigue Trajectories and Vocational Recovery Following Concussion

Carl Froilan Leochico, MD, MHSc, Toronto Rehab - University Health Network

Mark Bayley, MD, FRCPC – University Health Network

Fatigue is one of the most common and persistent symptoms following concussion and can significantly interfere with return to work, school, and other meaningful activities. This presentation will highlight findings from the Toronto Concussion Study, which examines longitudinal fatigue trajectories and their relationship with vocational recovery following concussion. Participants will learn how integrating guideline-informed, standardized fatigue assessment into routine clinical care can help identify individuals at risk for prolonged recovery, support individualized return-to-role planning, and guide evidence-based interventions such as activity pacing, graded return-to-work strategies, and workplace accommodations. The session will provide practical approaches for interdisciplinary teams seeking to improve functional outcomes and support successful reintegration after concussion.

12:25 – 13:25 Lunch, Sponsor Exhibit Viewing & Networking
Brief Overview: ABI Provincial Navigators: The Missing Link – Cathy Halovanic, Julie Osbelt (12:50 – 1:00 pm)

Rapid Podium Presentations, 6 presentations, 8 minutes each, followed by a group Q&A (13:25 – 14:20) Grand Ballroom

13:25 – 13:33
Rapid Podium #1

The Toronto Concussion Study: Exploring the Role of Pre-Injury Activity Levels in Non-Sports Concussion Recovery

Alice Wang, HBSc Candidate, University of Toronto

This study investigates whether pre-injury physical activity levels influence concussion recovery outcomes in the general population. Using data from 491 patients at the Hull-Ellis Concussion Clinic, researchers assessed the relationship between activity levels before injury and recovery time, symptom severity, quality of life, disability, and fear avoidance behaviours. Results showed no significant differences between high, medium, and low physical activity groups, suggesting that higher pre-injury activity levels may not directly improve concussion recovery. However, individuals who regularly exercised before injury may be more likely to follow post-injury exercise recommendations, which could support recovery behaviours.

13:33 – 13:41
Rapid Podium #2

Responding to Complexity: A System-Driven Approach to ABI Crisis Case Management

Julie Osbelt, Toronto ABI Network

Renee Brassard, Cota

This presentation explores the development of Cota's ABI Crisis Case Management program, created in response to identified gaps in services for individuals with acquired brain injury (ABI) experiencing situational crises. Informed by the Toronto ABI Network's system-level perspective and frontline experiences, the program provides rapid, short-term, community-based support through crisis intervention, safety planning, advocacy, resource coordination, and follow-up. The presentation will highlight the program's rationale, structure, eligibility criteria, and how cross-sector collaboration can help address complex ABI-related challenges and improve outcomes for individuals and families.

13:41 – 13:49
Rapid Podium #3

Overdose-Related Brain Injury: Bridging Harm Reduction and Brain Injury Care through Insights from People Who Use Drugs and Caregivers

Liam Michaud, PhD(c), York University

This presentation examines overdose-related (hypoxic) brain injury as an emerging concern within the acquired brain injury (ABI) and harm reduction sectors. Drawing on community-based research with people who use drugs (PWUD) and harm reduction providers across Ontario, the presentation explores the challenges of identifying, accessing, and coordinating long-term supports for individuals affected by overdose-related brain injury. It highlights the role of informal caregivers, barriers within existing systems, and opportunities to strengthen collaboration between harm reduction services and ABI rehabilitation programs to create more responsive, inclusive, and coordinated models of care.

13:49 – 13:57
Rapid Podium #4

Examining the Final Discharge Destinations and Health Equity Characteristics of Moderate to Severe Traumatic Brain Injury Survivors

Kassandra Kenyon, RN
Lynne Downey, Occupation Therapist, MSc. OT, OT Reg (Ont), Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre

This presentation examines factors influencing access to specialized neurorehabilitation (NR) following moderate to severe traumatic brain injury (TBI) in Ontario. Using retrospective data from Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre, the study explores differences in discharge pathways, clinical characteristics, and health equity factors among patients who were directly discharged versus repatriated to community hospitals. Findings highlight that repatriated patients often experience greater injury complexity, increased vulnerability, and reduced access to specialized NR. The presentation will discuss opportunities to improve care pathways, strengthen support for community hospitals, and promote more equitable access to rehabilitation services for individuals with TBI.

13:57 – 14:05
Rapid Podium #5

A Legally Informed Decision-Support Tool for At-Risk Discharges in Acquired Brain Injury Rehabilitation

Ami Li, MD
Jordan Pelc, MD, Sinai Health

This presentation explores the implementation of an At-Risk Decision Support Tool designed to support clinicians managing complex discharge decisions for patients with acquired brain injury (ABI). The tool helps rehabilitation teams navigate the balance between patient autonomy,

safety, legal considerations, and ethical challenges when patients request discharge before recommended supports are in place. Findings from the pilot project demonstrate that the tool was feasible, acceptable, and supported earlier team discussions, clearer decision-making pathways, and improved confidence among interdisciplinary clinicians. The presentation will highlight practical strategies for integrating structured decision support into ABI rehabilitation practice.

14:05 – 14:13 Rapid Podium #6

Building Awareness and Service Provider Capacity for Intimate Partner Violence Brain Injury in Canada

Halina (Lin) Haag, MSW, RSW, PhD, Wilfrid Laurier University

This presentation explores the often-overlooked connection between intimate partner violence (IPV) and brain injury (BI), highlighting the need for greater awareness, screening, and coordinated support for survivors. The session will introduce the Canadian Centre for IPV-BI, a national online hub providing evidence-based resources, education, training, and tools for survivors, professionals, and frontline service providers. Participants will learn about best practices for recognizing and responding to IPV-related brain injury and how collaborative systems of care can improve access to support and services.

14:13 – 14:20 **Group Question & Answer Period**

14:20 – 14:30 Transition Time

Concurrent #3

The following three sessions will run concurrently from 14: 30 – 15:15. Select one session to attend.

14:30 – 15:15
Session A
Grand Ballroom

A Functional Approach to Chronic Pain Management in the ABI Population.

Calvin Leung, OT Reg (Ont). Occupational Therapist, FunctionAbility

Chronic pain following acquired brain injury (ABI) is a complex and often challenging condition that requires a comprehensive rehabilitation approach. This presentation will explore the role of central sensitization and current neuroscience perspectives in understanding how persistent pain can develop and continue even in the absence of identifiable tissue damage. Participants will learn practical, evidence-based strategies including pain neuroscience education, activity pacing, graded exposure, and interdisciplinary care approaches to support individuals living with chronic pain after ABI. The session will highlight the importance of collaborative rehabilitation models that integrate occupational therapy, psychotherapy, and physiotherapy perspectives to develop individualized, client-centred plans that address the physical, emotional, and functional impacts of chronic pain.

14:30 – 15:15
Session B
Bay

Bridging the Gap After Brain Injury: Expanding the Continuum of Care for Work and Financial Wellbeing

Heather Nuttall, MSW, RSW, Registered Social Worker, OBIA

Zoe Fallis, Occupational Therapist, OT Reg. (Ont.), OBIA

Returning to work and achieving financial stability are important goals for many individuals following acquired brain injury (ABI), yet significant gaps remain within the continuum of care.

This presentation will explore how community-based, multidisciplinary programs can address unmet needs for individuals who face barriers accessing traditional rehabilitation and employment services. Using the Ontario Brain Injury Association's Return to Work and Life After Impact programs as examples, participants will learn about innovative approaches that incorporate readiness-based planning, employer engagement, individualized supports, wage subsidy strategies, and trauma-informed care. The session will highlight practical strategies to strengthen connections between rehabilitation, community services, and employment sectors while improving access to meaningful work, financial wellbeing, and long-term support for individuals living with ABI.

14:30 – 15:15
Session C
York AB

How Can We Better Support People with Traumatic Brain Injury after Intimate Partner Violence? Development of a Clinical Practice Guideline and Essential Tools and Resources.

Judith Gargaro, BSc, Med, Toronto Rehabilitation Institute, University Health Network
Danielle Toccalino, PhD, PMP, University of Toronto
Halina (Lin) Haag, MSW, RSW, PhD, Wilfrid Laurier University Network

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) resulting from intimate partner violence (IPV) is a significant yet often underrecognized public health concern, requiring coordinated, trauma-informed care across healthcare, community, and support sectors. This presentation will introduce the development of the first comprehensive clinical practice guideline for IPV-related TBI, created through collaboration among researchers, clinicians, and individuals with lived experience. Participants will learn about the evidence-informed recommendations, practical tools, and resources designed to improve identification, assessment, care, and support for individuals affected by IPV-TBI. Through a panel discussion, the session will explore strategies for implementing the guideline in practice, strengthening cross-sector collaboration, and advancing accessible, survivor-centred pathways of care.

15:15 – 15:45 Afternoon Break and Sponsor Exhibit Viewing (Grand Ballroom Foyer)

Keynote Address | Deidre (Dee) Sperry

15:45 – 16:45
Grand Ballroom

Project-Based Intervention: A Practical Solution for Delivering Evidence-Based Rehabilitation in Real-Life Contexts

Deidre (Dee) Sperry, M.Sc., S-LP Reg. CASLPO Reg. NLCHP

Assistant Clinical Professor (Part Time), School of Rehabilitation Science, Faculty of Health Sciences, McMaster University

Success after brain injury is measured not by isolated tasks, but by meaningful participation in everyday life. Yet translating evidence-based rehabilitation into real-world contexts remains a persistent clinical challenge.

Project-based intervention offers a practical way forward by organizing therapy around sustained, goal-directed projects that unfold over time. This approach provides the external

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	structure needed to support performance, reveal breakdowns, and integrate cognitive, physical, and psychosocial skills often treated separately. While not a new concept, knowing how to select and shape the right project for each individual can be challenging. Using case-based examples, this session will demonstrate how project-based intervention is developed and can be applied across rehabilitation settings to operationalize interdisciplinary real-world rehabilitation that is meaningful, measurable and memorable
16:45 – 17:00	**Closing of Day 1**

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2026 Conference Program Day 2

Day 2: Friday October 30, 2026 | Marriott Downtown at CF Toronto Eaton Centre

07:30 – 08:45	Breakfast (Grand Ballroom Foyer)
08:45 – 09:00	Greetings (Grand Ballroom)

Keynote Address | Dr. McKay Moore Sohlberg

09:00 – 10:00
Grand Ballroom

Enhancing the Precision and Effectiveness of Cognitive Rehabilitation by Applying the RTSS Framework

Dr. McKay Moore Sohlberg, PhD, CCC-SLP, ASHA Fellow
Professor of Communication Disorders and Sciences at the University of Oregon

Cognitive rehabilitation after brain injury is fundamental to recovery. It is complicated in that it is delivered by a diverse set of professional disciplines and community service providers. Additionally, cognitive rehabilitation requires knowledge and skills in the areas of cognitive processing, physical states, and psychosocial functioning, as well as behavior change, adaptation and resilience. Historically there has been inconsistent delivery and a lack of understanding of the field by stakeholders including patients and families receiving services, providers, researchers and funders.

This presentation reviews several key evolutions in the field including the updated rehabilitation framework, The Rehabilitation Treatment and Specification System (RTSS). The RTSS was developed to increase precision and communication in the delivery of rehabilitation. In this presentation, the RTSS framework will be applied to the delivery of the most common rehabilitation approach, the selection and training of cognitive strategies and external aids.

Learning Objectives:

- Describe key evolutions in brain injury rehabilitation in the last decade,
- Describe reasons why improved specification of rehabilitation interventions is imperative to improve rehabilitation services and bridge the gap between research and practice,
- Demonstrate how to apply the RTSS to common cognitive rehabilitation practices.

10:00 – 10:30	Break & Last Chance to Vote for the People's Choice Awards (Grand Ballroom Foyer)

Concurrent #4

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The following three sessions will run concurrently from 10: 30 – 11:15. Select one session to attend.

10:30 – 11:15
Session A
York AB

Beyond Accessibility: Clinical Decision-Making for Housing Accommodations in Acquired Brain Injury

Alicia Kralt, BSc, MSc (OT), OT Reg (Ont). Occupational Therapist, FunctionAbility

Housing accommodations for individuals with acquired brain injury (ABI) require more than a focus on physical accessibility. Cognitive, behavioural, and functional impairments can significantly influence safety and independence within the home, making thoughtful clinical decision-making essential. Through practical case examples, this presentation will introduce a collaborative framework for developing safe, functional, and sustainable housing recommendations. Participants will gain practical strategies to recognize potential risks, avoid unintended consequences, and support successful community living for individuals with ABI.

10:30 – 11:30
Session B
Bay

Enhancing Access to Bail Support in Ontario: a Focus on Navigation for Women with Brain Injury

Flora Matheson, PhD
Director of Programs, Unity Health Toronto; Arthur McLuhan, PhD
Unity Health Toronto;
Lucy Gudgeon, Director of Programs, Elizabeth Fry Society Toronto

Women with brain injury are disproportionately represented in Ontario's criminal-legal system and often face significant challenges navigating the bail process. This presentation introduces the Brain Injury Bail Navigation Program, an innovative initiative designed to improve access to justice and connect women with brain injury to essential health, disability, housing, and community supports. Participants will gain an overview of the program, learn about preliminary quantitative and qualitative findings, and explore how targeted navigation services can help address systemic barriers and improve outcomes for women involved in the bail system.

10:30 – 11:30
Session C
Grand Ballroom

Beyond the Mandate: Simple Tools for Responding to Crisis and Suicidality in ABI Clients

Eden Dales, BA, MSW, RSW, Eden Dales Social Work
Uri Carmel-Kraiem, MSW, RSW

Responding to suicidal thoughts in individuals with acquired brain injury (ABI) can be challenging, particularly for providers without formal crisis training. This practical session equips participants with simple, evidence-informed tools to recognize early signs of distress, respond with confidence, and support client safety within their professional scope. Grounded in trauma-informed care and the neurobiology of stress, the presentation introduces a structured framework for communication, safety planning, documentation, and decision-making, helping providers navigate difficult situations while fostering collaboration, connection, and coordinated care.

11:15 – 12:30 Lunch & Networking and Last Chance to Hand In Sponsorship Passbooks to Registration for a Chance to Win!

12:30 – 12:45 Recharging Yoga Session – Angie Davis (Grand Ballroom)

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Keynote Address | Dean Wardak

12:45 – 13:45
Grand Ballroom

The Importance of Choices

Dean Wardak, Motivational Speaker; Director, Tamara Gordon Foundation
Patient Partner, EMPaCT, Women's College Hospital
Brain Injury Survivor and Inspirational Speaker

The choices made by support workers, healthcare providers, caregivers, and even patients/clients directly shape the quality of life experienced by those living with brain injuries and other complex conditions. Every interaction—every word, gesture, or effort—contributes to that outcome. In this presentation, Dean illustrates how seemingly small decisions made in communication, attitude, and approach can transform the care experience and profoundly influence a person's wellbeing.

Learning Objectives:

By the end of the presentation:

- For Healthcare Providers and Caregivers

Participants will understand how small, intentional adjustments in how they support and communicate with patients/clients can lead to meaningful improvements in therapeutic relationships and outcomes. Drawing from Dean's lived experience, they will learn how choosing respect, humility, dedication, and compassion fosters trust, strengthens collaboration, and enhances the overall quality of care.

- For Patients/Clients

Participants will gain practical strategies they can use to build and strengthen relationships with healthcare professionals, family members, and caregivers. Through Dean's story, they will see how daily choices—both big and small—can shape their journey and help them create a fulfilling and beautiful life, even while living with a brain injury.

13:45 – 14:00 Closing Remarks, Presentation of People's Choice Award, Sponsor Prize Winners