

Healthy Living to meet quarterly with longer classes in 2016



The holidays are synonymous with tempting treats and even the Healthy Living Group, the monthly Project Independence and Empowerment class facilitated by BIAAZ, took some time to indulge during its December class.

Using just a food processor and a handful of ingredients – goat cheese, cream cheese, pesto and sun-dried tomatoes in olive oil – Juli Bryan, the licensed nutritionist that leads the snack portion of the class, taught everyone to make a decadent dip.

Bryan conceded that the olive oil, pesto and cheeses did pack a caloric punch, but she also pointed out the dip was full of good fats, had no sugar was and gluten free.

“If you’re going to indulge, it’s the best way to do it,” Juli said.

Besides, she added, the versatile recipe could be easily tweaked to be healthier. Neufchatel could be used in place of cream cheese and the olive oil can be drained from the sun-dried tomatoes, both of which would cut down fat significantly. Paired with rice or whole-wheat crackers, the and with festive green and red layers, the dip is a perfect take-along dish for a holiday party.

Since it began two years ago, the Healthy Living class had followed a popular format. Juli spends about half an hour during the beginning of the class teaching attendees to make a healthy snack. Afterwards, there’s usually a mini-class or presentation. In December, for example, Chris and Amy Hotaling gave a presentation on mindfulness (see our page 6 profile on the Hotalings in this issue).

Starting in 2016, however, the class will change its format. Instead of being held monthly, classes will be once every four months or so. And, rather than being only an hour, they will now be two-hour long sessions.

The new format will allow topics to be explored more in-depth, possibly taking the form of a full introductory class.

For more information on Healthy Living, or any of the activities facilitated by BIAAZ call the office at (602) 508-8024.



Chris and Amy Hotaling, key members of BIAAZ, use their own experience navigating brain injury to help others in one of BIAAZ's first support groups.

Guiding others with the map they made

Chris and Amy Hotaling use their experience with brain injury to help others move past it

The brain injury community is a tight-knit group. Nowhere is this more apparent than at brain injury support group meetings. Every month in Arizona rooms fill with strangers whose lives are forever altered, all of whom share an experience that, though common among all participants, is perversely unique for each member, too. As the saying goes, “If you’ve seen one brain injury, you’ve seen one brain injury.”

It’s not unusual for support groups to become second families for survivors and caregivers, especially as many members watch their own pre-injury support networks fade away in the months following the catastrophic injury. Meetings become one of the few, if not the only,

social outlet afforded to caregivers and survivors, especially during initial phases of recovery. Even after the dust has settled, many support group members continue to attend meetings for years, finding solace in people who can empathize with the often baffling, and frequently invisible, long-term impacts of brain injury.

The Brain Injury Alliance of Arizona facilitates seven support groups throughout the state, but it owes the success of one of its most successful groups to a very special couple, Chris and Amy Hotaling.

When Chris and Amy came to Arizona in May of 2006 from New Jersey, Chris was a brain injury survivor who had already gone through years of extensive therapy, much of it led by Amy herself. They had been involved in one of Brain Injury Association of New Jersey’s support groups and wanted to see what the Arizona branch could offer.

As it happened, a support group was needed in the northwest valley at HealthSouth Valley of the Sun Rehabilitation Hospital. Chris, prior to his accident during the late-1990s, was a trained counselor who had worked for the New York City School District. Chris hadn’t worked since his accident and had some trepidation about facilitating a meeting, but felt more confident with Amy by his side.

Twenty-three people showed up to the first meeting. Chris, still recovering from his own brain injury, used several coping mechanisms to help him be successful. He read hand-written notes aloud and asked that participants speak one at a time because overlapping sounds made it difficult for him to focus.

The meeting must have gone well because, as Chris put it, “it just grew exponentially from there.”

Soon, so many people attended meetings that Chris and Amy had to split everyone into two groups (one for family members and another for survivors) just to keep meetings manageable. Before long, the group grew in its scope

as well. A social committee was formed and fundraisers were held to finance outings and activities. A holiday party became a much-anticipated holiday tradition.

“We did all kinds of things,” Chris said. “It was just so touching, to see such a need, and people come each month.”

By the time Chris and Amy stepped away from the group five years later in 2011, over a 150 families attended the holiday party.

The group’s members weren’t the only beneficiaries of the supportive environment. Amy marveled at Chris’s own improvement. He no longer needed a strict format to keep from getting overwhelmed. Today, Chris walks around a room while giving presentations, ad libbing when necessary with ease.

“But it’s not only Chris,” Amy said. “We noticed the survivors in our group, month after month after month, seeing their growth.”

In one of those small acts that within the context of brain injury are huge breakthroughs, one day a brain injury survivor who never spoke aloud announced he had something to say. The group quieted and, for the first time, the man spoke to the room full of members. It wasn’t uncommon for caregivers to tell Chris and Amy that, thanks to the group, they finally felt like they weren’t alone.

In June 2007 Chris was asked to be part of a lunch panel at one of BIAAZ’s first Rays of Hope conferences.

“One thing led to another as the story goes and soon both of us were being asked to give presentations,” Chris said.

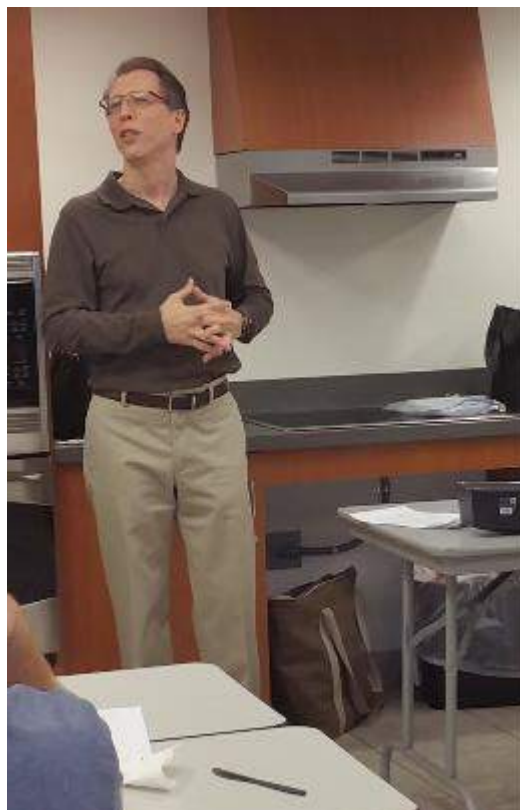
Chris credits Robert Horton, a contractor for the [Governor’s Council on Spinal and Head Injuries](#), for their early involvement in brain injury education and presentations.

“Robert’s encouragement, along with the support of others at the council and BIAAZ, provided the opportunity for me to reclaim a piece of my life before my injury that I thought was lost forever,” Chris said.

In the meantime Amy, who lost a banking job when the Great Recession hit in 2008, found fulfilling work as one of BIAAZ’s resource facilitators.

“That gave me a feeling of wholeness and that I was here for a purpose because there were so many callers that I helped with the true knowledge of living through this,” Amy said.

And live through it Chris and Amy had, without much of the knowledge and support available to today’s survivors and caregivers.



Chris Hotaling giving a presentation on mindfulness during December’s Healthy Living Group.

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Brain injury “back then”

What we know about brain injury and how to treat it has come a long way during the past two decades, a fact few people can appreciate like Chris and Amy. When Chris was injured 17 years ago, even advanced technology for the time couldn't detect certain kinds of injury.

At the time, Chris and Amy were young professionals living in New Jersey who commuted to New York City. Amy worked for a high-level financial institution managing the documentation department in midtown Manhattan. Chris was a guidance counselor under the New York City Department of Education. Chris was being recruited for an assistant principal position he was slated to begin the following semester.

One day, a fire broke out in Chris's building. During the evacuation a steel fire door hit Chris on the right side of his head.

“From what they tell me, I hit a couple of concrete walls and eventually the floor,” Chris said. “When I regained consciousness I, of course, had no clue what happened.”

When Chris awoke, a colleague stood over him. She helped him get up and evacuate the building. The fire was eventually extinguished and Chris went back inside to return to work. But the colleague who had revived Chris urged him to report the incident.

“I think she really saw some things happening that I wasn't aware of,” Chris said. “I didn't think it was really a big problem, I had a headache, but from what she said had happened I expected that.”

They went to the assistant principal's office where Chris was asked to fill out a report. To Chris's surprise, he couldn't fill out the form in front of him.

“I wasn't able to do it,” he said. “My colleagues would say, ‘Just write this down,’ and that's when I realized something wasn't right because my hands seemed disconnected from my brain.”

Chris was transported by ambulance to an emergency room. There, while examining Chris's head for physical injury, he asked Chris two questions: who the president was and how many fingers he held up in front of Chris's face. Chris answered both questions correctly and was discharged with instructions to take two aspirin and have his wife keep an eye on him.

But when Chris walked down the hall to meet Amy in the hospital lobby, he had to use the wall to keep his balance. That was on a Friday. Over the next two days, Chris's issues worsened. His left foot began to drag behind him and he couldn't navigate where he was going.

“My colleagues would say, ‘Just write this down,’ and that's when I realized something wasn't right because my hands seemed disconnected from my brain.”

~ Chris Hotaling, after a steel fire door struck him in the head

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“If I wanted to walk towards Amy I’d end up on the other side of the room even though I was looking at her,” he said.

His speech devolved from a slur to a stutter. On Sunday, Chris woke up to the discovery his face was numb.

The couple assumed Chris was having, or had experienced, a stroke. They went back to another emergency room

where a CT scan was performed on Chris. At the time, doctors speculated there may have been a micro bleed that went undetected. In any case, enough time had passed from the initial impact that some of the organic damage may have already healed.

Chris’s rapidly deteriorating condition, however, was undeniable, so doctors used his symptoms to patch together a diagnosis.

“That’s the first time we heard the term brain injury,” Amy said.

By the time Chris was admitted into a rehabilitation facility, about four to six weeks later, he couldn’t speak at all, walk on his own or feed himself.

Chris himself was only partially aware of his condition. He thought he walked into the rehab facility helped by Amy and two of his brothers. But five years later Chris learned his family had essentially carried him through the doors as his feet hung uselessly.

When he got through the doors of the facility, attendants immediately strapped him into a wheelchair. He could barely feed himself or hold his head up. That was when Chris said he realized he was in for a long road of recovery.

After several weeks of inpatient therapy, Chris began 18 months of outpatient therapy that consisted of everything from participating in a study for emotional regulation – he was having emotional outbursts – to traditional physical, speech and language, occupational, cognitive therapies, as well as counseling.

Chris left the facility better than when he entered – he could now walk with a cane – but he still wasn’t recovered and he and Amy both knew it.

“Even when I finished outpatient, I felt kind of patched together,” Chris said.

Wife, caregiver, partner

That’s when Amy stepped in and became Chris’s de facto at-home therapist. One of Chris’s physical therapists had offered to guide Amy with more exercises once Chris reached a certain point.

Cognitively, however, Amy was on her own, so she followed her gut instincts. She went to a bookstore and bought first-grade reading and Math workbooks, having Chris work on them daily. Amy supplemented that work by playing games like Scattergories with Chris. Throughout this period, Amy made a conscious effort to

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merge Chris's mental and physical recovery.

"Even when we would go for a walk, I would ask him those questions from Scattergories, so he would have to walk and think at the same time," Amy said. "I was always trying to work his brain."

Amy was ever-vigilant, watching for both signs of fatigue and mobility issues. When she saw Chris was having a hard time reaching for things, she would ask him to reach for soup cans from the top shelf of the pantry, standing behind him in case he lost his balance. She learned to watch for the signs that he'd had enough and needed rest.



Chris and Amy Hotaling at the 2015 Brain Injury Alliance of Arizona Professional Conference, where they were featured speakers.

"What was amazing was Amy's background was not in therapy, it was in finance," Chris said. "But she had this really incredible ability to just observe me, see what my challenges were, and use her gut instinct on how she could use these practical, functional tasks to help me improve the challenges I had."

To help Chris's balance and coordination, Amy took him to the pool. They were both swimmers, but Amy worried at first she'd made a mistake. The water's ripples caused a vestibular reaction in Chris that was so severe at first Chris could only stand in the pool.

But they went back, day after day, and soon Chris could lift a leg while holding on to Amy. By the end of the summer, Chris swam the length of the pool using a modified crawl stroke.

Amy saw it as a watershed moment.

"I call it a huge brain growth," Amy said.

Both Chris and Amy attribute much of Chris's success to his willingness to participate in activities.

"I was always a willing participant, I was always eager to improve," Chris said.

Step by step, Chris and Amy rebuilt their lives. Chris began to drive again and Amy returned to work. But the non-physical, permanent impacts of Chris's injury made New Jersey and New York unbearable for Chris. The noise often overwhelmed Chris, who had trouble going grocery shopping by himself.

And though Chris could drive again, he still struggled with navigation. Amy sometimes received calls at work from Chris asking where he was because he had gotten lost. Driving in ice and snow was utterly exhausting for him.

They realized that to improve their quality of life, they would have to move. Chris had family in Arizona, where

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the couple had planned to retire anyway, so Amy left her job in New York and in May of 2006 the couple found themselves in Arizona.

An ending, and a beginning

In a way, stepping down from the support group in 2011 was an epilogue to what had been a long, often times grueling, recovery journey for Chris and Amy.

But it was the beginning of a new volume of their lives, too. Amy has since returned to banking. Chris has continued to counsel, in a manner of speaking, through Aspire Place, a life coaching company he and Amy formed that focuses on moving forward after brain injury and other significant, life-changing events.

Chris describes it as a “non-therapeutic approach” to learning to live with brain injury, with a focus on getting through the practical aspects of a person’s day.

“What it allows us to do is coach others, caregivers and survivors, on moving forward, living with their brain injury, learning that it doesn’t define who you are,” Amy said.

The couple also continues to give presentations and reach out to the brain injury community.

Resource Facilitation Team Manager Jeanne Anderson knows first-hand the value of Chris and Amy’s unique perspective.

“I have seen professionals, survivors, and family members all connect with them and learn something from Chris and Amy’s talk,” Jean said.

They have also written a book together with Mark Leads, [Learning to Live Again...a day at a time](#).

Coping with both the ever-present impacts of brain injury but not allowing it to subsume everything in one’s life is a difficult balancing act. But that’s exactly what Chris and Amy have learned to do.

Chris and Amy will once again be presenting at the BIAAZ May 2016 Rays of Hope conference for brain injury survivors and care partners. To register visit raysofhope2016.eventbrite.com or call Meg in the BIAAZ office at [602-508-8024](tel:602-508-8024)



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