

Kathy Moeller's New Brain

By Kate Duffy, Autism Works, February, 2012

Kathy Moeller got a shock when her new boss called a meeting during her third week on the job: "Be sure to include the new person (Moeller)," he said, "She remembers everything." That was news to Moeller – her memory problems were a big part of why she usually got fired.

The job in a newspaper classifieds office was the latest in a string of jobs she had taken (and lost) after The Accident. The Accident was a head-on collision between her Honda Civic and a bus in 1990, which left the former marketing executive and UC-Berkley grad student with a permanent traumatic brain injury (TBI) and significant problems with many basic skills of daily life. After 14 months of rehab, she was gradually trying to transition back to life, but keeping a job was a challenge. It was a frustrating situation for a former diehard workaholic.

A core feature of TBI (which resembles autism in many ways) is difficulty remembering details and basic procedures. In spite of the "compensatory skills" training she got during rehabilitation, Moeller kept losing every job she tried.

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In desperation, Moeller bought a big binder and started to organize. She wrote down routines and processes; everything she had to do each day; and everything she had scheduled for six months out. Then she added a section about what to do during those now-more-frequent times when she got frustrated, overwhelmed, or angry. Everything in her life had to be in this binder, her "brain book", so she could make it through the day.

Now her new boss was praising her memory! "Amazingly, they were relying on the person with the brain injury to remember," Moeller says.

Soon after this incident, Moeller addressed the Washington Brain Injury Conference as a last minute replacement. She talked about how she used her Brain book: how it kept her on track and gave her resources and options when she began feeling disoriented, and how she could adapt it to support any new needs that came up in her life.



Kathy Moeller, Creator of the Brain Book®



After her talk, four people from the audience approached her about using her system. Soon word spread and more people asked about the system. Moeller had a new career – selling and training on the use of the Brain Book®. Over the next decade, Moeller emerged as a major TBI self-advocate and national expert on the day-to-day support needs of people with "cognitive differences".



The Brain Book®

The key to effective TBI "recovery", Moeller says, is a combination of the right tools and compensatory skills training. In this case, the right tools are The Brain Book®'s host of details, tabs and sections. It acts as a "prosthetic memory" allowing users like Moeller to actively supplement their memory. Without this prosthetic memory, new skills have nothing to "stick to" inside the minds of people experiencing significant TBI and related disabilities.

Although it is a little hard to describe in print how the Brain Book® works, Moeller has posted an informative video demonstration on her website, Cognitive Harmonics.

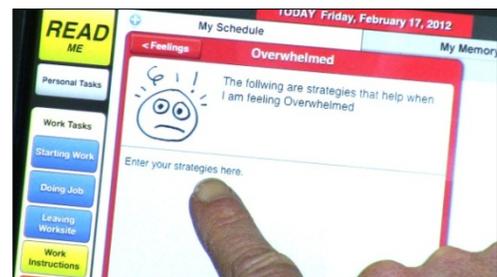
The Brain Book® is not rehabilitation in the traditional sense, because it uses a "teaching model" that includes training in the system and compensatory skills, as well as building a network of coaches around the person. Moeller has trained family members, counselors, clinicians, speech and occupational therapists to provide this important piece of the system.

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Bionic Brain®

Twenty years later, Moeller's initial, simple binder has entered the era of personal mobile computing as the new My Bionic Brain® system for iPads. For the last two years, Moeller and graduate engineering students at Seattle University have worked on this project, now in beta testing. The new system is a complete, home-based cognitive retraining program for persons experiencing any disability involving problems with short-term memory, organization, problem solving, confusion, disorientation, and time management.

Neither the book nor the electronic version is a standalone tool: they ship with instruction manuals and training DVDs, and users get further instruction, either in person or through the internet.

Now Moeller wants to expand her reach beyond the TBI community to others who could benefit from either the Brain Book® or My Bionic Brain®, including veterans with PTSD, people with anxiety disorders such as OCD, and people on the autism spectrum.



My Bionic Brain® Screen Shot
"Strategies for when I am overwhelmed."

Carly Elms, a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor with Kansas VR, agrees Moeller's tools should be more widely used. Elms speaks from experience: in 2000, she experienced a brain injury as a 19 year old soldier when an infection caused her brain to swell for 11 days, triggered several strokes, and put her in a coma for several days. These events left Elms with what physicians call an Acquired Brain Injury, which differs from TBI mostly in that the damage happened over days instead of seconds – the end result is nearly the same.

Following her brain injury, Elms struggled with challenges in employment and home life for almost a decade until she found the Brain Book® training system in 2011. Within six months of beginning training, Elms' mental and physical energy returned. At the time, she was working as a voc rehab transition specialist in Kansas. To her delight, Elms soon found that she no longer had to sleep the entire weekend to recover from the demands of her job. She calls Moeller's system a life saver. "Life revolves around my Brain Book® – if I don't have it in there, it doesn't get done," Elms says. "I leave my book open all the time."

As it happens, Elms works with youth with TBI, mental health diagnoses, and autism. She sees a huge overlap in practical support needs among these populations and actively promotes the Brain Book® System for them.

The Autism Works National Conference marks the first time Moeller will present the Brain Book® and My Bionic Brain® to the autism community. Conference organizer Scott Standifer spoke recently with Moeller about the differences between TBI and autism; "We couldn't think of any differences," says Standifer, "It was amazing. This is such a perfect fit for the autism community."



Kathy Moeller Trains a Client on My Bionic Brain®

Kathy Moeller will present on the principles behind the Brain Book® and My Bionic Brain® as cognitive prosthetics at the Autism Works National Conference in St. Louis, MO, March 6 & 7, 2011. Immediately following her presentation there will be a training demonstration of the My Bionic Brain® software by Moeller, Carly Elms, and another trainer. Details on the conference are available at

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Autism-Works/136057253090452>

or at <http://dps.missouri.edu/Autism.html>.

Moeller's practical suggestions for living with TBI can be found online at [Ask Kathy M](#) on the University of Missouri's Disability Policy & Studies website.

Details about the Brain Book® and My Bionic Brain® are available online at the Cognitive Harmonics website, including a video of the two systems in use:

<http://www.cognitiveharmonics.com/>

The Autism Works national conference is presented by:

