

Nick Dennen

Savage, Minnesota

TBI: To Become Invincible

I was born on Wednesday, April 26, 1978. My life actually began on Sunday, September 27, 1998. Now at age 20, I had experienced a re-birth, a renewal of life. I was born again, not only in the sense of accepting God into my life, but when I discovered my purpose. I had lived 7,459 days not knowing who I was or what I was supposed to do with my life. Mark Twain has said, “The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why.”

My “why” arrived in the form of an inspiring message borne from a 35-foot fall, a near drowning, and a two-year rehabilitation. I was at the after-game party, I was drinking with my teammates; I was underage. The party I was at “got busted.” I don’t remember that night, or the week before, all we know is that a different police officer who was patrolling wanted to investigate what I was doing walking alone at 2:38am and I was chased by his police dog. So we think trying to escape the dog, I fell off the cliff.

I was unconscious for roughly two months; death was near. My actual time in a coma is questionable, however, even when my eyes opened, I was still completely out of it. I couldn’t do anything other than simply lie there. So many people can relate to this pain. Brain injury affects different people in different ways; however, what we share in rehab experience is comparable. Having to relearn certain skills like walking, talking, writing, feeding oneself, brushing one’s teeth, or more practical strengths like shopping, organizing data, and making calls to a repair company, do not come easy. In fact, they are practically impossible.

But with physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy, a person can evolve and become human again. By enduring a TBI, it erases the young person who was once there, the “Old Nick,” and begins to construct the new individual who is here now, the “New Nick!”

Rebuilding is the key. Yes, you will never be who you were, *but with the right guidance, you can change who you'll become.*

My entire right side was paralyzed for months. I lost over 40 pounds in a matter of a couple months. I was tube fed. I wore diapers. I had to drink thickened liquids. I ate beets, and I hate that disgusting vegetable. I had slurred speech. I had chest tubes. I still have a bald spot on the back of my head showing where my hair fell out. I have a scar on the middle of my throat where the trach was. This is a daily reminder of when life tried (key word here is “tried”) to beat me down. My family went through hell not knowing if I would ever get to a point where I could write this story.

What is most unfortunate is how “easy” the media and/or people in general make a recovery from a brain injury seem to be. It does not happen overnight. My rehabilitation took roughly two years, but I can honestly say that it took much longer than that. The “experts” say that recovery from a brain injury is a two-year process. I agree, I was able to start walking, and begin to talk, and perform certain tasks, and go back to school, after a couple years, but I feel that it takes much longer than two years to rebuild and enhance the life that was stolen.

There is a saying that says it takes ten years to become an overnight success. This seems to be more accurate. It also says it take 10,000 hours to become an expert on something—and this averages out to be 20 hours a week for 10 years. With a TBI, this is something we all have “blood memory” of. We have owned every experience, every setback, every loss, every victory, and every lesson we wish we wouldn't have had to learn. We own the pain of our family and friends. So, I think it would be fair to say, that based on these statistics, all of us who experienced our TBI, can be regarded as “experts” on brain injury approximately 417 days after our brains were damaged. Pretty cool, huh?

The critics would disagree. They don't want us to succeed. They don't want us to share our life experience for the greater good. So much of what we have gone through can help other people. So much of our lives can give hope to somebody else. It is more than just surviving a brain injury; it is *thriving because of the brain injury*. It is a way to enhance the healing and develop a

stronger version of yourself. The TBI may have ripped our worlds to shreds, but it can be pieced back together through faith, hope, and love.

It is what we experience that can change a life. It is our stories that give strength to an important cause. It is our stories that allow others to share theirs. And it is how we think of our traumatic brain injury that defines us.

TBI is defined as Traumatic Brain Injury. After receiving mine, I have come to realize that TBI has multiple meanings.

1. TBI: To Believe in the Impossible.
2. TBI: To Baffle the Imagination.
3. TBI: To See Beyond the Individual.
4. TBI: To Become Invincible.

David A. Grant, speaker and author of *TBI Hope & Inspiration*, believes TBI means “To Be Inspired.” We all need to be inspired. A TBI truly is more than just a traumatic brain injury. It is a life-changing event that tests our strengths, while highlighting our weaknesses. It ultimately comes down to either seeing your glass half-empty, or seeing it as half-full. Initially, I only saw all the things I had lost—the abilities, the future, the life—and wasn’t willing to see the things I had won—the new abilities, the new future, the new life. Was it the brain injury preventing me from seeing the bigger picture? Perhaps.

I thought my life was over; I didn’t think I was good enough. I thought my brain injury had won. This is all nonsense. It is my hope that reading about my experience will change your perspective, and give you the hope necessary to move forward.

- My balance is off, and I walk with kind of a slight limp at times, but I am walking.
- When I am tired, my speech seems to be a little delayed (probably only to me), but I am talking.
- My right side is still weaker than my left, but I am still able to workout like a house afire at the gym.

So much of what we all experience after enduring a brain injury are experiences that do hold the potential to benefit us. I guess it comes down *to a matter of perspective*, where many of my limitations are self-imposed.

Did I ever think I would ever go through what I had? Heck no! This was something that always happened to somebody else. But once I came to terms with where I was, I was able to see “why” I had been given this knowledge, or opportunity, and what I was supposed to do with it. My former theology professor taught me a theory he developed years ago called, The Dorito Principle. A dorito has three sides. The first side suggests we “Seek to thrive.” We can overcome our pains and enhance our life. The second side says, “Seek to love and be loved.” We must love others as we love ourselves. And the third side says, “To live for the common good!” Our life’s purpose is to make a positive difference in the world. It is never about “us,” rather it is about “them,” and helping others. I had to redefine TBI.

It is so important to always remember that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. We can make a difference in the world. It’s important to remember all the things that we are so extremely fortunate to have. Always recognize that people have feelings—life is too short to hold a grudge—and never be ashamed for the person you are and everything you stand for. Every person matters, and every single life is sacred and deals with its own yesterdays, tomorrows, and today’s.

*Remember that your attitude will either lift you up, or bring you down, so please make the choice to live your best life now.*

## BIO

Nick Dennen is an inspiring author, speaker, and, first and foremost, a husband and father of two—who would not be here had I not been injured—with a strong purpose of serving the greater good. His mission is to recognize the value of personal relationships while focusing on a positive attitude and heightening the awareness of traumatic brain injury. His motto is simple: anything really is possible if you believe. Anything! [www.dennen23.com](http://www.dennen23.com)