

# RETURN-TO-WORK SUCCESS

GUEST EDITOR  
RYAN NORRIS

## How Ryan Used His Skills as a CEO to Manage His Own Recovery

### INSIDE

- ⚙️ Former MLB pitcher and brain injury survivor Evan Marshall returns to work...twice
- ⚙️ What cautious companies need to know about hiring brain injury survivors
- ⚙️ 10 Practical Return to Work Tips



# From the Desk of Ryan Norris, Survivor & Return-to-Work Edition Guest Editor

Hello,

My name is Ryan, and I'm honored to be the guest editor for this issue of The Noggin. I'm incredibly grateful for the opportunity to share a bit of my story with you and, in doing so, hopefully offer some insights and hope.

In November of 2021, I was diagnosed with a benign brain tumor. In March 2022, a craniotomy was performed to remove a meningioma, classified as a non-traumatic brain injury. Even though the surgery was successful, my recovery wasn't a straight line. The eight weeks I took off from work were spent healing, surrounded by an incredible support system of my wife, kids, family, friends, and my church family. They brought meals and helped with transportation of my kids to school and activities, giving me the space I needed to focus on my recovery.

As the provider for my family, I have always taken pride in going to work. The thought of what would be different, and the fear of the unknown, were significant challenges I faced post-surgery. However, setting a clear vision for my recovery played a crucial role. This mindset helped me navigate the uncertainty and allowed me to find my new normal.

I also had to face the reality of my scar. I can remember the first time I saw someone stare at it. I felt a little self-conscious at first, but that changed when I realized I could use it as a tool. I now see my scar as a badge of honor—a conversation starter. I genuinely welcome those moments because they give me a chance to create awareness about brain injuries and share my faith in Jesus, who guided me through it all.

My hope for this issue of The Noggin is that through my story, you'll find a sense of community and hope in your own journey back to work. I've learned that you can apply a business mindset to healing by focusing on where you want to be, not where you were. And remember: Momentum breeds momentum—every small victory you celebrate is the foundation for the next.



Ryan Norris | Guest Editor, *The Noggin*



*Your generous support is crucial for the Brain Injury Association of Arizona to continue providing brain injury survivors, their families, and caregivers with free programs and services. Please scan the QR code and donate today.*

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**OUR VALUES—**

**Integrity:**

Being dependable and following through on commitments

**Excellence:**

Modeling a positive example as we pursue high expectations

**Collaboration:**

Actively listening and working together for a common purpose by brain injury thrive in their community

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# Letter from the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

We're delighted to have **Ryan Norris** serve as guest editor for the **Return-to-Work Success** edition of *The Noggin*.

In rehabilitation terms, "return-to-work" describes the process of supporting a person who has sustained a brain injury as they re-enter the workforce—whether that means returning to a previous job or exploring new, meaningful employment that aligns with their abilities, needs, and goals after injury.

While returning to work is an important milestone, we also know it's rarely a simple one. The journey often involves medical, cognitive, emotional, and practical considerations—not only for the survivor but also for the entire family system.

We're deeply grateful to the members of our community who share their stories and help build a more informed, compassionate, and accommodating Arizona. In this issue, Ryan is joined by additional voices, including **Evan Marshall**—a business professional and former MLB pitcher—and **Felicia Davis**, who was in the midst of a high-octane human resources career when she survived a stroke. Each contributor has had to navigate unforeseen circumstances that changed their lives and tested their resilience—something we witness every day at the **Brain Injury Association of Arizona (BIAAZ)**. We hope these stories encourage and motivate anyone currently walking a similar road.

As we step into a new year filled with hope and promise, our goal remains the same: to show up for the thousands of Arizonans living with brain injury—and the loved ones who support them. We hope you'll connect with us this year, whether virtually through a support group or in person at one of our statewide educational or social events.

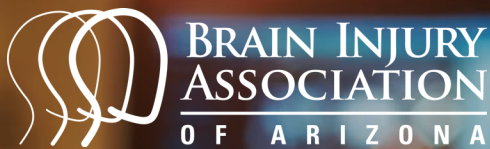
If you believe in this mission, we invite you to consider donating to BIAAZ. Your generosity makes practical support possible—**support groups, resource navigation, peer mentorship, and education across our state**. Every gift, of any size, helps ensure survivors and families are not navigating this journey alone.

With gratitude,

**Carrie Collins**

Executive Director, Brain Injury Association of Arizona





# RESILIENCE

## Virtual Return-to-Work After Brain Injury



An annual celebration of the businesses, programs and professionals that get Arizona survivors of brain injury back to work.

This signature annual event culminates in a special award for a survivor who exemplifies the resilience and dedication it takes to re-enter the workforce after injury.

### Thank You 2025 Presenters



Susan Fitzell, M.Ed., CSP  
KEYNOTE SPEAKER  
International Speaker,  
Author, & Educator



Felicia Davis  
SPEAKER  
HR Professional &  
Stroke Survivor



Patrick Hayes  
HOST  
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Austin Peterson  
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Producer | Former Major League Baseball  
Pitcher | Brain Injury Prevention Advocate

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# Saying the Quiet Part Out Loud



"I'm terrified I'm going to get fired."

"I'm worried about what my kids will remember."

"I'm worried about my finances."

"My recovery isn't a straight line."

▶ **"I'm terrified I'm going to get fired."**

You worry you're a liability now. The truth is, your grit makes you invaluable.

▶ **"My recovery isn't a straight line."**

Healing isn't a straight line. It's a series of missteps and victories.

▶ **"I'm tired of people saying, 'You look great!'"**

It's a kind thought, but the invisible battles with fatigue are real.

▶ **"I get jealous of my past self."**

Mourning your past self is normal. But you're becoming a more resilient you.

▶ **"I'm worried about my finances. My recovery has been expensive."**

The financial stress is real, but holding on to your faith and the focus on providing for your family can give you the strength you need to rebuild your life.

▶ **"I'm worried about what my kids will remember."**

They'll remember your strength and the lesson that even when life is hard, you never give up.

▶ **"My scar is a badge of honor, but sometimes I just want to hide it."**

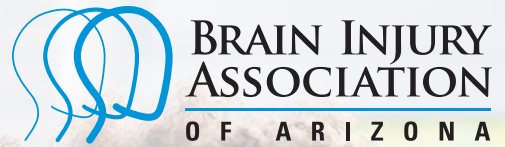
It's okay to feel both ways. Your scar is a symbol of a battle you won, even on days you don't feel like celebrating.

▶ **"My brain injury has affected my identity."**

It's not about losing yourself; it's about building on who you are.



# Building Your Return-to-Work Toolbox



## 2-Part Webinar February 2026!

Join the Brain Injury Association of Arizona for a deep dive into returning to work after brain injury. We'll examine everything from practical tips like time management strategies to less obvious aspects like obtaining your medical clearance.

This seminar is two days, February 6th and 20th.

**FEBURARY 6th** — will extensively look into how to honestly assess your own work readiness from the physical and mental viewpoint.


**FEBRUARY 20th** — will examine practical strategies and tools to navigate daily work life, like using assistive technology, goal setting and navigating interpersonal relations as you build your own return-to-work toolkit.



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A man and a woman are sitting on a brick porch. The man is on the left, wearing a light blue patterned shirt and dark pants. The woman is on the right, wearing a pink shirt and blue jeans. A small, fluffy white dog is sitting between them. The background shows a brick wall and a glass door.

# Evan Marshall Named 2025 Return-to-Work Champion

BY CHRISTINA EICHELKRAUT

Evan Marshall, brain injury advocate and former MLB pitcher, was a featured speaker at the Brain Health Leadership Breakfast, a signature Brain Injury Association of Arizona event. He's also the recipient of the Return-to-Work Champion award – an award he's earned by returning to work not once, but twice.

Evan Marshall, brain injury advocate and former MLB pitcher, was this year's keynote speaker at the Brain Health Leadership Breakfast, a signature Brain Injury Association of Arizona event.

He's also the recipient of the Return-to-Work Champion award – an award he's earned by returning to work not once, but twice.

It's been 10 years since former MLB pitcher Evan Marshall was hit in the head by a 105 miles per hour line drive while pitching for the Arizona Diamondbacks Triple-A affiliate during a 2015 regular season game. Evan's skull was fractured and required surgery to control his brain swelling and bleeding.

With the help of intensive rehabilitation at Barrow Neurological Institute, Evan made a



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remarkable physical recovery, returning to the mound within just seven months. He now reflects that may have been enough time for his body to heal, but he actually needed more time to get his head back in the game.

"In hindsight, I was physically ready but not mentally to be in that space again," Marshall shared.

Initially, everything seemed fine, at least as far as Evan's pitching was concerned.

"At the very beginning, when I hadn't really gotten back into the grind, everything was peachy," Evan said. "I thought that the next year around, I'll be back."

But soon enough, the lingering effects of the injury began to take hold.

First, there was the intensely competitive environment that is the hallmark of all professional sports. At the time, Evan was one of the youngest players on the team, and, like most professional athletes building their careers, he was acutely aware that there was always someone in line to take his place.

Then there was the psychological fallout of the event itself. After months of laser focus on his physical recovery, Evan's mind and heart began to process what had happened.

"The game doesn't care if you're feeling vulnerable; the game is the game, so deal with it," Evan said. "So, I was never really afforded the opportunity to say, 'I don't think I'm quite here.'"

Although Evan was pitching well, the signs

that he had overcome a massive physical trauma began to show. It was a strange juxtaposition to grapple with amidst intense, constant pressure to perform.

"I know that I'm physically doing it," Evan said. "But I was still ducking every time a ball got hit back up the middle."

And that wasn't all.

While navigating the relentless demands of Major League Baseball, Marshall also battled nightmares, flashbacks, an unwanted backdrop to the pressures of constant relocation between teams.

Then there was the demanding, chaotic schedule of being in the MLB itself. At the time, players could be called to play for other teams or switched to the minor leagues as many times as an organization needed. Each call meant navigating all the logistical challenges of a major move, usually on short notice and with an extremely tight deadline.

His wife, Allie, recalls the hidden emotional and mental toll of those years, emphasizing the resilience and determination it took for their family to move forward.

"Not only was he trying to focus on baseball, but when you get that call after a game at midnight, you need to take a flight and get to Reno by tomorrow...that will take a toll on anyone, just the uncertainty," Allie said.

Every relocation meant navigating a lit-

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any of issues. Sometimes, moving meant figuring out how to pay two rents during the transition, or how to transfer keys to the next person moving into the company housing. Then there was moving the household cars, family members, and pets. Usually, it has to be done in a matter of hours, sometimes in as little as half a day.

Evan's first season back on the mound after his brain injury had several relocations, and it didn't help his mental or emotional state.

"I think I went up and down like six times that next season," Evan said. "And I think more than anything, I needed stability and comfort just to kind of get back into it."

By the time the season ended, Evan was utterly exhausted.

"I performed OK, ups and downs, but I was just mentally drained and exhausted by the end of that," Evan said.

That fall, Evan wasn't a September callup, which brought a lot of mixed feelings.

On one hand, Evan partly welcomed the reprieve, hoping the break would reignite the love he had for the game that had begun to fade.

"It was becoming more of a job at that point, than a passion from childhood," Evan said.

But it wasn't entirely a blessing in disguise, either.

"More than anything, getting sent down is failure," Evan said. "Even if it's outside of your control, you could've played great, but you're still on that plane. It signifies that you didn't do enough while you were there to earn a spot to stay."

It was a difficult pill for Allie to swallow as well.

"I think as a wife I took it personal too," Allie said. "He almost died, and then we spent the whole off season trying to get him back, and going to all these therapy appointments, and it was just a lot."



Now it felt like all that hard work and focus were to no avail.

"And then to have that year that followed, it almost kind of felt like a slap in the face because you beat this hurdle, but then you don't even know what to do," Allie said.

The Diamondbacks were supportive, offering Evan counseling and other mental health support. But at the professional level, that felt like a Hobson's choice.

Evan felt strongly that he "could not show an ounce of weakness."

And in some ways, that mindset worked in his favor.

"I think that's part of what drove me through the rehab so quickly, and my desire to get back quickly was because I was trying to prove it," Evan said.

On the other hand, the flashbacks and nightmares were an ever-present reminder that he may have benefited from some help.

It was a lot for anyone to process, let alone a young family quietly grappling with the aftermath of brain injury.

## COMMUNITY, SUPPORT, HEALING

Finding community through BIAAZ was a turning point. By connecting with other survivors and caregivers, the Marshalls found the support and understanding they needed to begin deeper healing.

"It wasn't until we came back to Arizona, and we were able to start meeting other families, that it felt like we could take a breath," Allie said. "Like we were able to kind

of start healing, just to hear other people's stories."

Though being in a space with other survivors of brain injury, caregivers and spouses who understood their situation was cathartic, Evan admitted that for him it was still a bit of a double-edged sword.

"You're thrilled to be with families to understand their walk of life and what they're going through and relating it back to your own story," Evan said. "But at the same time, you're also there, and you're not in the locker room, not on the field."

Despite missing the career that had been his lifetime calling, Evan was grateful to have an understanding and empathetic community.

"Being in a room with others who truly understood what we were going through gave us space to finally let our guard down," Evan said.

The experience also helped him maintain perspective and gratitude during an exceptionally trying time.

"Obviously, we saw cases that were far more severe than my own," Evan said. "It was enlightening to see just how lucky I was to be on the fast track to recovery."

Working with BIAAZ also gave the couple a chance to more fully emotionally process the injury and its fallout, especially the rather discordant experience of Evan's rapid physical recovery with the less visible impacts of brain injury.

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"We just really couldn't talk about the vulnerabilities unless we were at events with [BIAAZ]," Allie said.

## NEW CHAPTER, NEW JOB

Marshall went on to play nine more seasons of professional baseball before retiring in 2023 following an elbow injury.

"The decision to retire came mostly out of injury," Evan said.

In November of 2021, Evan underwent Tommy John surgery. Though the surgery and his recovery went well, he did suffer a few setbacks and missed the next season.

By April 2023, Evan had signed with the Los Angeles Angels and was doing well physically, finishing his rehab journey, lifting heavy during his training and throwing hard when pitching. In the offseason after the 2023 season, he felt the familiar elbow pop and found himself abruptly staring at the prospect of missing yet another half-season at least.

That was when Evan made the decision to leave baseball, which was bittersweet. He had been recruited from college and had dreamed of being a professional ballplayer his whole life.

"It was tough because it was the only job I'd ever had," Evan said. "It was the only identity I'd ever had other than being a father and husband."

But if there was one thing Evan knew, it was how to confront and deal with challenges. He recalled something he'd been told when he first joined major league baseball: "Every player becomes a former player eventually."

Evan loved the game and everything it had given him, but he recognized the time

had come to move on.

## NEW CHAPTER, NEW CAREER

Evan is a natural leader. He has a quiet, steady confidence balanced by a sincere humility. Early in his baseball career, those personal qualities, combined with his experience, had drawn the attention of the Chicago White Sox coaching staff, who named him a team captain.

Evan wasn't sure what was next, but whatever it was, he was ready to bring the same focus and discipline that had gotten him through the challenges he had faced during the past few years.

First things first, he had to create a resume.

"That took some time because I'd never had a real job before," Evan said, chuckling.

Fortunately, MLB has a lot of player support services to help its athletes transition out of the league successfully. The organization helped him with everything from gathering referrals to getting a decent headshot. Evan had earned his college degree while playing for the White Sox, so he already had that foundation in place.

Next: Figuring out what he wanted to do. That began an exploratory phase. Like all job seekers, Evan leveraged his network and started going to job interviews.

Even before he retired, Evan had been told by friends who worked for a commercial insurance firm that he'd be a great fit for the industry. They reminded him that an opportunity might still exist for him in that field so he interviewed for the position.

He was hired, and thus began his next professional chapter.

Transitioning from a baseball diamond to a corporate office was an adjustment, and there was a learning curve.

"I didn't even know what a deductible was until I was twenty-eight," Evan said.

But true to form, Evan also didn't shy away from learning. He leaned into his new career with characteristic focus and quiet determination. Evan took classes and spent his first year learning as much as he could about the industry from anyone he encountered.

"It was learning best processes and practices to be successful, just like learning best processes and practices to be a successful pitcher," Evan said. "It's the same in business; you just title it differently and it's not lifting weights or long tossing."

It took a bit to get his bearings, but Evan is now comfortable in his new role.

"I'm still fighting the fight, it just looks a bit different," he said.

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In addition to Evan's baseball career, Allie and Evan's family also grew during the years following his injury. They welcomed their first son, Ryan, in 2018 and a second son, Connor, in 2021.

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## THE LIFE WINS

In addition to Evan's baseball career, Allie and Evan's family also grew during the years following his injury. They welcomed their first son, Ryan, in 2018 and a second son, Connor, in 2021. Butters, who spurred the creation of BIAAZ's Butters Fund, was joined, a bit begrudgingly, by Daisy, a black lab puppy.

And Evan still has plenty of time on the baseball diamond, coaching the baseball team at Trinity Academy, where in 2025 the team made school history by winning their first state title. He also coaches his son Ryan, who is on a basketball and baseball team.

The Brain Health Leadership Webinar celebrates resilience, leadership, and community while spotlighting the impact of brain injury and the importance of ongoing support and awareness.





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# Felicia Davis' Tips for an Emotionally Regulated Return-to-Work



Felicia Davis is a longtime human resources executive and stroke survivor turned entrepreneur who helps leaders find their authentic voice in high-stakes moments. After experiencing a stroke that challenged her ability to communicate, Felicia rebuilt not just her speech but her entire approach to influential communication. Today, she's the founder of Haus of Vocal Empowerment, where she teaches executives how to integrate nervous system regulation with powerful presence. Her journey from medical crisis to the keynote stage embodies the resilience and transformation possible after brain injury.

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## 1. REGULATE BEFORE YOU REACT

Returning to work after a life-altering experience can trigger stress, fatigue, and sensory overwhelm. Before you respond to an email, join a meeting, or make a decision, take one intentional breath. Your nervous system sets the tone for how you show up — give it time to find calm before re-engaging.

## 2. REDEFINE PRODUCTIVITY AS PRESENCE

You are not who you were before the injury — and that's not a loss, it's a recalibration. Instead of measuring success by how much you do, measure it by how fully you're present to what you're doing. Quality of focus will take you further than quantity of output.

## 3. LEAD WITH YOUR HUMANITY.

Authenticity builds trust faster than perfection ever could. Share your journey — even briefly — with your team, clients, or community. It not only invites empathy, it normalizes resilience as a leadership quality.

“Before you communicate, regulate. A calm nervous system is the foundation for confident leadership.”

— Felicia Davis, Stroke Survivor, Longtime Human Resources Professional, and Entrepreneur

# RYAN'S STORY:

## From Leading His Own Company to Managing His Recovery

At first, Ryan Norris didn't think much about the scattered collective of symptoms that he experienced for the past five years.

There was some vertigo, migraines, occasionally hearing loss in one ear, even a seizure. But even though these were fairly serious symptoms, Norris said he "never really thought too much about it."

But then one day after singing in his church he stepped off the stage to find he'd totally lost the hearing in his left ear.

Norris, now very concerned, made an appointment with his ENT who had him get an MRI.

That was when Norris learned he had a brain tumor.



**Initially,** doctors thought he had an acoustic neuroma, a benign brain tumor that grows on the nerve connecting the ear to the brain. Although benign – meaning it won't spread to other parts of the body – a tumor in that location can still cause damage to the surrounding area and nerves.

Soon, however, Norris learned he was dealing with a much rarer circumstance. His tumor was actually a meningioma, the most common type of brain tumor. They grow very slowly and often have no symptoms but can eventually damage surrounding brain tissue or nerves to a degree that a person becomes severely disabled. In Norris' case, the tumor – fortunately benign – was growing in the same place an acoustic neuroma would grow which is an extremely rare circumstance.

That was in November 2021. By March, he had brain surgery to have the tumor removed, which included a craniotomy.

## EMOTIONAL IMPACTS

Though that may all sound fairly straightforward – after all, a brain tumor is an acquired brain injury, not a traumatic brain injury, or TBI – Norris said the shocking news of having a brain tumor brought with it plenty of its own kind of emotional trauma.

“We go our whole lives never thinking about our brain, until you need to think about it,” Norris said. “And typically, when you’re thinking about it is when something traumatic come across, like, ‘Hey, you got a brain tumor.’”

That’s a hard pill for anyone to swallow.

It definitely takes a toll on you and you’re really grasping to educate yourself when you don’t know much about it, so it can be traumatic in that sense for sure.”

In an instant, Norris found himself grappling with a swirl of questions and the ever-present fear of the unknown.

“So, it’s kind of a feverish pace to educate yourself,” Norris said. “What do you do?”



What’s next? What are the implications of this? How is this going to affect my family, how is this going to affect my life?”

In addition to his own questions, Norris had to break the news to his family, including his wife and three young children who ranged from 7- to 11-years-old at the time.

Though young, he said his kids “were old enough to understand the seriousness of it, and it did take an emotional toll for sure.”

Norris said met the challenge as best he could, trying to maintain a positive attitude despite an ever-present undercurrent of his own fears.

“I try to frame things with the right mindset because I feel like our mindset is what determines our trajectory,” Norris said. “If I can remain positive and optimistic through it, then I figured that would feed through to my wife and my kids as well. So that’s the kind of outlook that I tried to have.”

## PRACTICAL MATTERS

Of course, in addition to navigating the emotional impacts of what was to come, there was also the purely practical matters to deal with as well.

Among the risks of the upcoming surgery were learning to walk again, total loss of hearing and facial paralysis. That meant his business and family had to be prepared for a life with him in that condition.

When Norris was diagnosed, he and his wife had a small flooring business they had built together over the past 17 years. This wasn’t just about Norris, it was a situation that would impact employees and customers, too.

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Norris knew he would need a plan, and he and his wife began putting that in place. And though he was fortunate to have people he could delegate tasks to, Norris is quick to emphasize that it was not a simple task to undertake.

"It's not easy," Norris said. "I don't want to say it's easy, because it isn't. And it takes a lot of effort to put the right pieces in place to process how to do it."

In fact, Norris delayed his brain surgery by several months just to ensure he could have everything set up properly and his business could go on with him in recovery. He didn't know if that would be weeks or months, or what that would look like.

Planning for such a huge unknown would easily overwhelm anyone, but Norris set a goal and decided to train his focus on that.

Norris made a decision that he would be recovered enough to attend Easter service.

"I'm a firm believer that momentum breeds momentum," Norris said. "So if I can do one thing every day to better myself, better my recovery, better my situation for my employees at the time, than that momentum will breed that momentum."

Ultimately, Norris was completely out of commission for about eight weeks. He emerged from surgery without any of the negative impacts that worried his doctors and his hearing fully intact, an outcome he attributes to his surgeons and faith.

That didn't mean there was no recovery,



however.

"Like in business, we want to focus on where we want to be, and not necessarily where we are so much," Norris said. "I tried to apply that same mindset to recovery."

**"The scar on the side of my head is a story," Norris said. "And if that leads to conversations that I might be able to have with others to relate to them and give them hope and courage, then that's what I'm going to do."**

Norris emerged from surgery with something to focus on and held on to that throughout his recovery. Norris believes having that goal, along with

support from his family and church community, is what enabled him to return so fully to his life.

Friends helped get his kids to school and sports, dropped off meals every night, and prayed for him.

"That's something I'll never forget," Norris said.

When the Easter service came up, Norris and his family were there. It was one of the first time he went out in public since his surgery.

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## NEW CHAPTER, NEW CALLING

For all his success in recovering, the entire experience was still deeply transformative for Norris.

"I really felt like God was calling me into something different," Norris said.

That was when the opportunity to be the COO for a law firm presented itself. To Norris, it made a lot of sense. The law firm specialized in personal injury, including a significant amount of work for TBI survivors and their family.

Norris, ever aware his acquired brain injury, or ABI, was less severe, saw an opportunity to leverage his own experience and empathy while still appreciating the more severe outcomes other brain injury survivors face.

"Having gone through what I've gone through, I couldn't imagine going through an absolute TBI, concussion, a car accident or something," Norris said. "Going through recovery is one thing but not having the legal side of that as well, that's a whole aspect that I don't know that a lot of people know, that you need to be covered by both sides."



Going from a CEO to a COO was its own transition to a new normal.

"It's realizing that there are portions of your life that will no longer be the same," Norris said. "And that's OK. It's embracing the new normal."

After all, Norris did still have major brain surgery. And though his outcomes and lasting impacts may not be as drastic as other brain injuries, it is still something he continues to navigate.

"It's learning a new pace, it's learning you're not as fast at something or you're not as quick at something," Norris said.

Norris has had to learn to excuse himself when crowds are too big or loud and leave some work for another day because he's at the end of his cognitive bandwidth.

Ultimately, he said, this chapter of his life is all about "learning to be OK with not being OK."

Norris knows that undergoing brain surgery and a total career shift is a lot to go through.

"And it's a lot to ask of your family, too," he said.

With his family and his faith to ground him, Norris looks ahead to the future in his new role and perspective.

"The scar on the side of my head is a story," Norris said. "And if that leads to conversations that I might be able to have with others to relate to them and give them hope and courage, then that's what I'm going to do."





## CEO of My Recovery

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I never thought my work as a Chief Executive Officer would teach me how to heal, but it did. As a provider for my family, I've always taken pride in going to work and doing my part. After my surgery, the thought of what my new reality would be, and the fear of the unknown were a heavy weight to carry. I knew I had to approach my recovery with the same vision I would use for a company, I had to focus on where I wanted to be, not where I was. My goal was not just to heal, but to rebuild a life that was strong, purposeful, and effective in my new normal.

This organized way of thinking led me to a simple truth: momentum breeds momentum. In business, we know that one small win can build into a powerful chain reaction of success. I found this to be completely true in my recovery. My first victory, which may have been as simple as walking a few extra steps, gave me the confidence to take on the next challenge. Every small accomplishment was the fuel for the next one. This helped me find a new pace I could keep up with.



Ultimately, my experience taught me that being the “CEO of your own recovery” isn’t about being perfect; it’s about being resilient and adaptable. The journey of overcoming a brain injury is a testament to strength and resolve. It’s about taking control of what you can and trusting the process. I hope my story shows you that by setting a vision for your healing, celebrating every victory, and focusing on the path ahead, you too can become the “CEO of your recovery”.



# My Scar, My Story

The first time I really looked at my craniotomy scar in the mirror, it felt like a part of my story that was now etched onto me forever. For a while, I felt self-conscious, worried it would be the first thing people noticed.

I can still remember the first time I saw someone's gaze linger on the side of my head; it made me want to hide. The truth is, my surgery, while a huge blessing, left me with a physical reminder that felt like a permanent mark telling the world what I had been through.

I've learned to deal with the scar in a different way. When I first came out of surgery, still a bit groggy, one of the first things I asked my surgeon was, "Did you make me look like Tom Brady?" The answer was a swift, "No." It was worth a shot, and we both had a good laugh about it.

I now see my scar as a badge of honor. It's a testament to the battle I fought and a physical symbol of the strength and resolve it took to get me to where I am today. It's not a flaw; it's a part of my story. I've found that my mindset has changed from a place of self-consciousness to one of gratitude.



I genuinely welcome those moments when people inquire about it because they give me a chance to start a conversation. It's an opportunity to create awareness about brain injuries and to share my faith in Jesus, who brought me through it all. My scar has become a tool for connection and a way to encourage others who might be facing their own silent or visible battles.

Ultimately, we all carry our own scars, whether they're from a physical injury or a life-altering experience. My hope is that my story can inspire others to view their scars, whatever they may be, as a badge of honor—a powerful reminder of what they have endured and overcome.



# Managing Neurodivergent Employees

## How to Navigate the Unique Challenges and Maximize the Talents of Your Neurodiverse Workforce

BY SUSAN FITZELL, M. ED, CSP

‘Management’ is an active and ongoing process with the goal of creating an environment where all employees flourish and unwrap their potential. When workers are empowered to use their entire spectrum of gifts, they are in better stead to advance company objectives, while simultaneously achieving their personal goals as well.

Adjusting to the individual personalities that make up the rich tapestry of life, however, can require some intentional strategy. In this sense, there’s no major difference when it comes to managing neurodivergent people. You do need to acknowledge, however, that they think differently and process information in dissimilar ways (Forbes Councils Member, 2021).

### SO, HOW SHOULD WE ‘MANAGE’ NEURODIVERGENT WORKERS?

I recently came across an article released by the Forbes Expert Panel, which met to share ideas about how to best support neurodivergent employees. I found this article to be so meaningful, in fact, I decided to summarize these important concepts and share them with you. Here are the main takeaways:

#### 1 Understand the Breadth and Depth of Neurodiversity

Set your preconceptions aside. Neurodivergent people share your humanity, even though their conscious and subconscious processes may unfold in ways with which you are unfamiliar.

#### 2 Reach Out Directly to Subject Specialists for Advice

Accept that your education, training, and experience may not prepare you for managing neurodiverse employees. Sum up the courage to ask others to assist you in your leadership role. Seek advice from subject specialists if you are short on answers. Be open to deferring to their wisdom and offering up that part of your leadership role. Reach out to your business network and see what has worked for others.

#### 3 Take Steps to Create a Supportive Environment

The key to managing neurodivergent people is building a support base within which they can optimize their potential. Engage neurodivergent workers on a one-on-one basis. Be transparent as you explore their strengths and needs. Ask how you can support them.

#### 4 Walk the Extra Mile by Providing Extra Mentoring

Every new employee requires guidance as they begin their career with your company.

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Neurodivergent people, however, may need extra support interpreting job requirements. They may likely need a more supportive work environment as well (Morris et al., 2015).

To effectively manage neurodivergent employees, you must acknowledge that their longing for enrichment and success matches your own. Put yourself in their shoes to help them find the extra support they may need.

## **5 Empower the Employee to Reach Their Full Potential**

Neurodivergent people think differently. Tap into this potential, questioning those boundaries you thought were fences. Empower your neurodivergent employee to challenge your tried and tested ways of doing things. Have the courage to be open to fresh perspectives. Accept the company 'normal' is not the only way.

## **6 Place Your Neurodivergent Worker Where They Best Belong**

A neurodivergent worker becomes a real asset when you enthusiastically place them in a role that enables their difference to shine. Identify their best skills, then find a role that complements them. Take pause until you have a neuro-appropriate match for their skills. Don't hire an unsuitable person just to meet a diversity target.

## **7 Reconsider Whether Coming in to Work is the Best Option**

Some neurodivergent people — especially those with autism — genuinely prefer to work on their own. They may have a home environment that inspires them more than a workplace setting. Bright lights, noise, and constant interaction with coworkers may be actively counterproductive. Ask them where

they would rather be to work at their best.

## **8 Reach Out and Learn What Others Are Doing**

Be humble and accept you may not have all the answers, especially if you are managing a neurodiverse workforce for the first time. Reach out to your peers and ask them about their experiences with placing neurodivergent employees in fun, creative, and rewarding roles. You may discover that a neurodiverse workforce gives you the competitive advantage that's been absent in your team.

## **9 Encourage Neurotypical Employees to Celebrate Diversity**

Hiring people who think differently from us cannot be a one-way street where the benefits flow in a single direction. Neurotypical employees interacting with colleagues who think alternatively will also experience intellectual stimulation, growth, and a rejuvenated imagination. Implement accommodations that work for everyone. Create trainings and educational programs that help neurotypical workers understand and work with their divergent thinking counterparts. Organizations are stronger when their employees are on the same team.

## **10 Keep Thinking and Growing Your Neurodivergent Perspective**

Invest time to understand what makes neurodivergent people tick. Lower your shields as you enter their world. They may think, even behave differently from you, but this does not mean they are wrong. Con-

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nect with the neurodivergent community, read their words, and seek out their voices. Learn to appreciate their experience and perspective.

## 11 Continue Being Accommodating

If you are neurotypical, then you were born in a comforting world where most things seem natural and work for you. For divergent thinkers, the world (and particularly the workplace) can be chronically challenging and disheartening. As the need for accommodation presents itself, stay flexible and focus on creative solutions.

Managing neurodivergent employees

takes time and energy because it forces growth and growth is hard. But it is also an enriching experience to see their talents bear fruit and become better for it.

## A NEURODIVERSE WORKFORCE IS WORTH IT

Acknowledging and respecting the divergent thinkers in your workforce is inevitable when you do these eleven things. Managing neurodivergent employees involves accepting that they think and feel differently from you. But working together, your organization can achieve more.

This is the role of the empowering manager.

## REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READING

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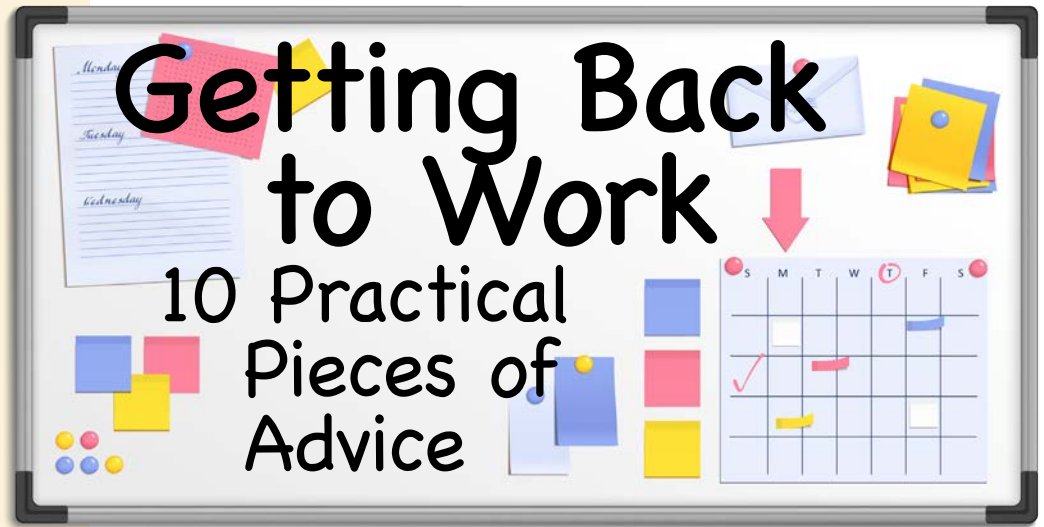
**Susan Fitzell, M. Ed, CSP**, is a nationally recognized presenter, author of nine books for teachers, trainers, and parents, an educational consultant, and CEO of Aim Hi Educational Programs, LLC. As an independent consultant and coach, Susan offers the personalization, continuity, and consistency necessary for true change in any organization. She works side by side with teachers, school administrators, and business leaders as a coach and trainer, employing Brain Power strategies that take learning to the next level.

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Returning to work after a brain injury is a significant step that requires a thoughtful and honest approach. It is a journey of finding your own “new normal,” and a lot of the process is about learning to be a good advocate for yourself. Here are some of the things that helped me navigate this transition successfully.



- 1. Start with a practice run:** Before you dive back in, test your endurance in a low-pressure environment. Try to mimic a work week by getting up at a set time, getting dressed, and spending a few hours on a focused task. This will help you know what your body needs to get through a workday.
- 2. Break down big tasks:** The thought of tackling a large project can be overwhelming. Instead, break it into smaller, more manageable tasks. Completing a small piece at a time will give you a sense of accomplishment and keep you from feeling frustrated.
- 3. Learn to manage your energy:** Think of your daily energy as a limited resource. Learn to recognize your personal signs of fatigue and listen to them. Pacing yourself is a smart strategy, not a limitation.
- 4. Use organizational tools:** You don't have to rely on your memory alone. Use external aids like a planner, a calendar, sticky notes, or a notebook to help you remember important information and daily tasks.
- 5. Set a home routine:** Establish a clear morning and evening routine. This helps your brain and body transition from rest to work and from work to rest.
- 6. Find your quiet place:** Minimize distractions by finding a quiet space to work or use noise-canceling headphones to block out background noise. You can also listen to calming music to help you focus.
- 7. Take scheduled breaks:** Set alarms for short breaks throughout your day, and stick to them. A quick walk or a few deep breaths can help you clear your mind and reset.
- 8. Communicate your needs:** It can be hard to ask for help, but it's a sign of strength. Be open with your employer and colleagues about what you need to be successful, such as more time for a project or a more flexible schedule.
- 9. Build a support system:** You don't have to do this alone. Lean on your treatment team, family, and friends for support. You can also connect with a vocational specialist to help you get back on your feet.
- 10. Embrace your new mindset:** Shift your focus from “how it used to be” to your “new normal.” Embrace your personal growth and understand that success is about being effective and productive in your own way.



BIAAZ doesn't just help survivors who are ready to get to work – we're also available to help the extraordinary employers who give our clients the chance to thrive.

If you want to tap into our amazing talent pool but have questions or concerns about whether your organization is a good fit, we can help you with:

- 💡 Information about ADA and workplace accommodation policies
- 💡 "Soft skill" advice for creating a great environment for everyone
- 💡 Resource facilitation: Where to get accessible office equipment, find legal advice, or how to contact various government agencies like DES

Your next best employee is ready for their first day back to work. We can ensure you will be, too.



*We're Here to Help!*

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# Hiring a TBI Survivor

## Addressing Common Employer Concerns

BY RYAN NORRIS

As leaders, we're constantly looking for the most resilient and adaptable talent to build our teams. We talk about hiring for grit and resolve, but how often do we see it proven in a way that's impossible to ignore?

I can tell you from a C-suite perspective that the quiet fears you might have when you see a potential hire is a survivor of a brain injury – whether it's about their energy, their productivity, or their ability to collaborate – may be standing in the way of finding the exact person your company needs.

Here's the truth: hiring a TBI survivor isn't a liability; it's an opportunity. The same resilience, adaptability, and sheer determination required to navigate a life-altering injury are the same qualities a company needs to succeed. The individuals who have persevered through that kind of journey only stand as a testament to their strength and resolve. They have already proven they can face the most difficult of challenges and solve problems in creative ways.

It's an honor to hire someone who has not only survived but thrived after a brain injury. Their unique perspective on life and work can be an incredible asset to your team, enriching your workplace and creating a more compassionate and understanding culture. Your company will be better for it.

The background of the poster is a scenic photograph of a golf course. In the foreground, there is a green golf course with a small pond and a fountain spraying water. In the middle ground, there are several trees and a small building. In the background, there are large, rugged mountains under a clear blue sky. The text is overlaid on this image.

**SAVE THE DATE**

Friday, November 13th, 2026  
8:00 AM–9:30 AM

# **Arizona State of Concussion Breakfast**

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