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PAU Alumna and Neuropsychologist Experiences TBI Firsthand

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Mylea Charvat, PhD, became interested in the brain as a teenager, when her grandmother showed signs of memory loss. As an adult, Charvat went on to train as a clinical neuropsychologist and neuroscientist, becoming a 2012 graduate of the PAU PhD in Clinical Psychology program. She eventually went on to found and lead Savonix, Inc., a neurocognitive assessment and data platform.



Her work recently became even more personal when she was involved in a bicycle accident that left her with a traumatic brain injury (TBI).

"My last memory of that day was happily riding my bike in Golden Gate Park. It was 9:30 in the morning, I was zipping along at about 15 miles per hour. I ended up with post traumatic amnesia, so I don't remember all these details. My watch told me how fast I was going because I was tracking my ride. It also pinpointed the exact spot where the accident happened. I could even figure out how long I was unconscious for because it shows how long I laid there before I started moving again in the ambulance."

When Dr. Charvat regained consciousness, she was both a patient and a neuropsychologist.

As the medical staff asked her questions, she became aware they were performing the Glasgow Coma Scale, a method for assessing a level of consciousness, and Oriented x3, checking that the patient knows "person, place, and time." But she knew she was scoring low on her cognitive abilities.

It's been a few months since the accident. When speaking with Dr. Charvat, she comes across as a fast-talking, smart, energetic CEO. She's on a path to full recovery, but still suffers from the TBI.

"I now have a very strong startle response to anything moving on my left," Charvat said. This may be due to the possibility it was a pedestrian who made a hard right into the bicycle lane, causing the accident. Charvat isn't certain, though, because the pedestrian left the scene even as other pedestrians tried to get his contact info.

And because of the part of her brain that was damaged, Charvat could predict what kind of symptoms she might have, but that didn't prevent her from having them or being surprised by them.

"One of the things no one was prepared for, and that was really hard for me, was the suicidality. I became very suicidal. That was frightening to me, frightening to my family."

It became clear to Charvat that the field of psychology's response to TBIs, and suicidality, does not always serve or focus on the patient. For example, her therapist wanted to conduct safety checks, whereas Charvat needed to talk about the deeper issues disrupting her mental health and even the physical health of her brain.

"What I needed more than anything was normalization of what I was going through. I needed someone to say, 'You've had a TBI. These thoughts aren't you, per se. This isn't going to be you forever. This is an injured brain.'"

Also the pragmatist, she felt her mental health could have been improved by discussing how long the normal healing process takes, what to expect at each stage, and by doing a chain analysis around her suicidal thoughts to find what might be exacerbating her conditions.

The upside now is, "I have so much more empathy for my patients," she said.

Charvat was in the midst of a career change well before the bicycle accident, but it seems to have catalyzed her mission.

In 2014, Charvat founded Savonix, Inc., which delivers mobile cognitive assessments at a drastically more affordable price. As she supports the company's transition to Asia, she's also moving out of her CEO role and into a new career chapter.

"I want to make mental health tools and information more accessible and democratized to the average person. The average person can't afford thousands of dollars to see a neuropsychologist. With Savonix, you can get a neuro-psychological evaluation for about the price of a co-pay. Plus, you can take the tests at home, on your smartphone."

Charvat is currently working part-time on consulting projects as well as a much larger project in healthcare and finance in stealth mode. This allows her time to focus on her health and recovery, including therapy, exercise, and sleep.

Coincidentally, this stealth mode may take six to nine months, which is also the average healing timeline for traumatic brain injuries. Despite the rocky start Charvat had to 2021, it looks like the year will be one of growth and meaningful developments in her personal and professional lives.

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