



Spectrum Podcasts

Dr. Jane Bluestein
Instructional Support Services, Inc.

Technology and Special Needs

Guests: Don Tillman and Gracie Tillman

Recorded: October 26, 2011

Background and Bio: Donald Tillman, owner of Safe Data, LLC, started working with assistance technology as a result of needs that his wife, Michelle (Gracie), experienced as a result of a Traumatic Brain Injury. In rehab and recovery, Gracie received a great deal of attention and was connected with others. After leaving, she was unable to drive and felt very isolated. Her memory was also affected by her accident. She has made use of technology, especially her iPhone and iPad, to stay organized, remember things she needs to do (like take medication), and stay connected with others.

Program Description: Dr. Jane Bluestein talks with Don Tillman, owner of Safe Data LLC & his wife Michelle "Gracie" Tillman, who experienced a traumatic brain injury. The program focuses on the use of technology and various applications that help with organizing tasks, time management, school homework demands and calendar reminders. Gracie shares her dramatic story and the isolation she felt when she was recuperating as well as the tools that helped her connect with other people during her traumatic time. Don gives suggestions for technology that can be beneficial for any brain trauma, autistic, or special needs persons.

Highlights of Podcast

Gracie had worked with Palm Pilot for planning and although she was "glued" to her planner, she was not involved with computers. She moved to iPhone and became more engaged with technology because of Don's experience with the device.

Parents and teachers of children with special needs have concerns around organization, time management, and school demands, for example. Technology is useful for a variety of tasks, especially for people who need to record reminders for different responsibilities, events, and tasks:

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- Making appointments
- To-do lists
- When to take medication
- Alerts and alarms on mobile devices. (Gracie: "Alarms are my best friend.")

Gracie was resistant to using a memory aid. Kids are generally less resistant to coming to technology, even at very young ages.

Don: Many of these devices, especially iPad and iPhone, are very intuitive, even for people with little experience or confidence in using technology.

Affordability is an issue for some. Alternatives: Color Nook has a browser and some apps. By far, the most resources available are those designed for the iPad, iPhone, and iPod Touch. Look for used equipment on Amazon or eBay. High turnover on equipment means that nearly new devices are available at good discounts, usually in perfect or near-perfect condition.

Search for assistance software for hearing- or speech-impaired: Wide variety even for highly specialized needs. Don: "The App Store doesn't discriminate on the basis of volume." This has allowed for the development of apps that would otherwise not be commercially viable (not only for individuals or families, but also for state agencies and organizations.) Compared to just a few years ago, these resources are now "insanely affordable."

Example: **Proloquo2go**. Uses icons on the screen to help people express what they need to say. Literacy is not an issue as long as individual can identify color, shape, or design of icon. **Proloquo2go**: Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) for iPhone, iPod Touch, and iPad: <http://www.assistiveware.com/product/proloquo2go>

Don: "If anyone has a doubt that there's an app to help them cope with an ability or a disability, go ahead, shop. It costs nothing to shop. It's probably gonna be there."

Example: **MyHomework** (app) recommended by a teacher at a school for Special Needs children: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/myhomework/id303490844?mt=8>

Which apps do you use, Gracie?

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"I'm glued to my calendar."

Fluther: A forum to answer other people's questions and discuss issues that offers a way to be connected and avoid isolation, sense of community; lets her talk to people; spend time with people with enough distance and time lapse "that I can compose things, I can think about what I want to say... think about sentence construction and how I'll be understood... I have a chance to think before I speak."

Don mentioned the therapeutic value of connection and feedback on whether your communicating effectively and can help some people communicate verbally. (It's sometimes easier for Gracie to communicate in writing than verbally, and Fluther has helped with that.)

Can also open a door for social communications for people with social anxiety or communication issues. Has come up on Fluther that the resource is valuable for people with a variety of other problems (bi-polar, attention-deficit): <http://www.fluther.com>

Don: Also **Facebook** is free. Social networking sites are great for folks who are more isolated or have a hard time communicating or connecting: <https://www.facebook.com>

Meetup: Allows you to indicate interests and then alerts you to events happening locally that you can attend: <http://www.meetup.com>

Evernote: Free and available on every platform. Can put in PDFs, take screenshots, or type something in and it lives on the Evernote cloud: <http://evernote.com>

Additional Resources: Traumatic Brain Injury

I have lifted this entire section verbatim from Camille Noe Pagan's *The Art of Forgetting* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 2011), a story about a friendship between two women, one of whom experiences a Traumatic Brain Injury: http://www.amazon.com/Art-Forgetting-Camille-Noe-Pagan/dp/0525952195/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1300888441&sr=8-1. Used with the author's permission and my gratitude.

The Brain Injury Association of America offers info about brain injury research and legislation, as well as support for individuals living with brain injury. 1-703-761-0750, <http://www.biausa.org>

The Family Caregiver Alliance has a setion on its Web site with reading recommendations and other support resources for family members of

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individuals with brain injury. http://www.caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/content_node.jsp?nodeid=579

The National Institutes of Health's Web site has a dedicated brain injury section that provides information and research, as well as links to ongoing clinical trials for individuals with brain injury. <http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/tbi/tbi.htm>

Call the **National Brain Injury Information Center** to connect with a brain injury specialist. 1-800-444-6443.

ReMIND/Bob Woodruff Foundation provides resources and support to injured service members, veterans, and their families. <http://remind.org>, info@ReMIND.org

The Traumatic Brain Injury National Resource Center's Web site has answers to frequently asked questions about brain injury. <http://www.tbinrc.com>

Think First National Injury Prevention Foundation provides educational resources and holds events on preventing head injuries. 1-800-THINK-56, <http://www.thinkfirst.org>

Additional Resources: Autism

Three days before this show was recorded, *60 Minutes* ran a segment called "Apps for Autism" with Lesley Stahl (CBS, Oct. 23, 2011, producer Karen M. Sughrue). The segment featured the iPad with specific apps that are helping some autistic individuals use pictures, videos, and symbols, for example, to communicate what they want, what they're feeling, or what they know and understand. Many of the individuals featured, from young children to a man in his late 20s, were unable to express these things through speech.

The show featured the app Don mentioned, **proloquo2go** (link above), as well as the free app **AutismXpress** (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/autismxpress/id343549779?mt=8>); there is also **AutismXpress Pro** for \$1.99 (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/autismxpress-pro/id435630422?mt=8>) to help users understand and express feelings.

Look in My Eyes (<https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/look-in-my-eyes-1-restaurant/id349835339?mt=8>) is another app, this one part of a series, to help autistic children improve eye contact.

Although the device doesn't work with all children, one teacher mentioned that for many children, the iPad draws students in: "They're engaged with

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it in a way that we don't see with other toys or puzzles or teaching tools." Stahl cited research that indicated increased willingness to socialize and enhanced attention spans. One parent of a young autistic child noted that if her son's speech did not come, "this will be his voice."

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