



Returning to education after brain injury

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As a charity, we rely on donations from people like you to continue providing free information to people affected by brain injury. Donate today: www.headway.org.uk/donate.

Introduction

Gaining qualifications through education is a milestone for many people, but the effects of brain injury can make it difficult for some survivors to keep up with course content, stay organised and remember key information. Some survivors may therefore be hesitant about the prospect of returning to education, but with the right support and research beforehand, it is entirely possible to complete an educational course after brain injury.

This factsheet has been written to offer information and tips for brain injury survivors who are considering returning to education.

Why consider returning to education?

Returning to education after brain injury can be an excellent way of acquiring the skills and qualifications necessary for future employment. Studying can also provide a sense of pleasure and purpose, even for those who might not be able to return to work.

It may be that you are considering returning to education to finish a course that you began prior to your injury. Or perhaps you are interested in studying something new that you hope will help with finding work in the future. Regardless of your personal reasons, returning to education is a great way of developing a range of skills and meeting new people, and can therefore be very rewarding and fulfilling.

Choosing the right course

With so many different courses available nowadays, it can be difficult to decide on what and where to study. Below are some suggestions to help you with choosing a course that would suit you.

- Consider looking for courses that are offered on a part-time basis, as the course content will be spread out over a longer period of time which can make it easier to keep up with.
- If you feel that it would be difficult for you to travel to your classes due to mobility issues, consider enrolling in a distant learning course. Teaching is usually web-based, so this may only be suitable for you if you are comfortable and confident with using a computer, potentially for long periods of time.



- Attend open days at your chosen college or university. Open days are a good opportunity to ask questions and experience the atmosphere and surroundings of the environment first-hand. It can also be useful to visit if you have accessible needs so that you can make sure there are suitable facilities.
- Remember that completing a course can take several months or years and will likely be a long-term and ongoing commitment. Moreover, many courses charge considerable fees so you should do plenty of research before enrolling about the course itself and the support that will be available to you through the college or university.
- Consider searching for taster courses offered by some colleges and universities. These allow prospective students to try out the course and experience student life before actually applying. The UCAS website has a taster course search function that you could use to find taster courses in your area: www.ucas.com/events/exploring-university/learn-about-uni-taster-course.
- Check what disability support services the college or university offers. Most places will have this information on their website, however it can also be useful to contact the place directly and have a discussion with them about the effects of brain injury, especially any 'hidden' effects, and how you might be supported accordingly.

Tips for coping with the effects of brain injury while studying

The effects of brain injury are varied, and many of them can affect performance when studying. However, with the right support and the use of coping strategies, it can be possible to complete a course successfully. Here we offer some tips of how to cope with the effects of brain injury while studying.

- Talk to your tutor about your brain injury. How much you choose to tell them is up to you, but it can be helpful to at least tell them that you have a brain injury early on so that they are aware of any support you may require throughout the duration of your course, for instance if you need extra time for assignments or exams.
- If you experience fatigue or have difficulties with concentrating, study for short periods at a time, for instance only half an hour at a time, and rest or have a nap as soon as you feel that you are starting to get tired. While it can be tempting to carry on when you are in the middle of studying, it is very important to take regular breaks away from your workspace.
- Try different methods of study. You may find that it is easier to study from printed material and textbooks and to make notes by hand, rather than using a computer for long periods of time.



- If you have problems with organisation, attention and concentration or memory, use tools that help with staying organised such as diaries, calendars and checklists and stationary such as highlighters, bookmarks and sticky notes.
- Ask tutors if you can use a Dictaphone to record classes if you struggle to process information or have memory problems.
- If your course requires significant computer use and you feel that you may struggle with this, consider researching adaptive technology that can make working on a computer easier for you.
- Be aware that stress can worsen fatigue, which in turn can exacerbate other effects of brain injury. Unfortunately stress is, for many, a normal part of education. If you are starting to feel stressed, speak to your tutor or GP about this, or find ways to manage your stress such as through mindfulness. There are often psychological services available at colleges and universities that can help students to cope with the pressures of education, so you might wish to make contact with one of these as well.
- Consider telling new friends that you make or fellow students about your brain injury so that they have a better understanding of any support you may need. Headway's factsheet [Brain injury: a guide for friends](#) can be a useful resource to help friends with understanding brain injury and learning out how they can best support you.
- If you have memory problems, ask fellow students or your tutor to send you reminders about deadlines that you need to meet, or mark these clearly on a calendar.
- Find out whether there is a disability advisor at the college or university, as you can get support with a range of issues from them.
- [Headway's Brain Injury Identity Card](#) might be useful in a number of different settings while you are studying and also in everyday social scenarios.

Financial support

Following your brain injury, you may be entitled to welfare benefits. For guidance on your eligibility to benefits, speak to your nearest Jobcentre or Citizens Advice, or use an online benefits calculator. General information about welfare benefits after brain injury is available on the Headway website at www.headway.org.uk/about-brain-injury/individuals/practical-issues/welfare-benefits/.

Many students receive student finance loans to pay for their course fees or living costs while studying. Information about the rates of this and how to apply is available on the



government website at www.gov.uk/student-finance.

There are also some grants that can help towards the cost of education, depending on circumstances. The organisation Turn2Us has a grant search function that can help you to find a grant that you might be eligible for. You can access this at www.turn2us.org.uk.

Students with a disability may be able to receive Disabled Students' Allowance, which can be received in addition to student finance loans or grants, and can be used to pay for things such as specialist equipment, helpers or other disability-related costs of studying. For further information, you will need to contact the service responsible for providing student finance help in your area. In England, this is Student Finance England; in Wales it is Student Finance Wales, in Scotland it is the Student Awards Agency for Scotland and in Northern Ireland it is your regional Education Authority.

There are a number of university student discount schemes that are set up to offer students various discounts on things such as eating out, shopping and social activities. In some cases you may simply be able to use your student ID card to get discounts. For some schemes you may need to pay between £10 to £30 to order a discount card.

Conclusion

Returning to education can be a rewarding alternative to returning to work or can enhance your skills set if you are considering returning to work in the future. There is support available to help people with a disability with enrolling in and undertaking education from a range of sources, and a number of different coping strategies that brain injury survivors can use to help them while studying.

We hope that the information in this factsheet has been helpful to you if you are considering returning to education.

To talk through any of the information in this factsheet, you can contact the Headway helpline on 0808 800 2244 or helpline@headway.org.uk.

For further information on brain injury, visit the Headway website at www.headway.org.uk.

Case study - Lucie Bell

Lucie Bell had big plans to graduate from her university course and land her dream job in marketing, but following a subarachnoid haemorrhage in 2006, everything was put on hold – including her education.

She said: "I probably put too much pressure on myself to achieve my goals, wanting to prove I was the same person as before when very clearly I wasn't."

After returning home from hospital, it became clear to Lucie that she wouldn't be able to



finish her university course that year.

“I was halfway through my final year and I had to drop out which was devastating for me. I had to leave behind my friends, my degree and my boyfriend. I felt like I’d lost everything.”

“I’m not very good at taking it easy, so I was determined to finish my degree and land my dream job on a marketing graduate scheme.”

Luckily, Lucie was able to re-enrol on her course the following academic year, but this brought about new challenges.

She said: *“I was so determined to graduate and start my career that I was too stubborn to ask for help.”*

“In retrospect, I should have had some counselling at this time to help me work through the huge trauma I’d been through and spoken to someone at the university about support with workload and exams.”

“The main piece of advice I would give is to be kind to yourself. Any kind of brain injury is a huge trauma, both physically and mentally.”

“Asking for and taking help is not admitting defeat, it’s necessary and is absolutely not a sign of weakness.”

If you have any feedback on this factsheet, please share with us at www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/hwpublications or by contacting our Publications and Research Manager at publications@headway.org.uk.

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