

Mental health and brain injury



This publication is part of Headway's *Effects of brain injury* series. To browse through our publications on a range of issues relating to brain injury and download these free-of-charge, visit www.headway.org.uk/information-library.

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Introduction

A brain injury can affect people's mental health in different ways, affecting quality of life, self-esteem, independence and relationships. Some mental health conditions can be managed by lifestyle changes and learning new coping strategies, while other conditions will require professional treatment.

This publication is written for brain injury survivors. It offers information on how a brain injury can affect mental health.

A separate publication has been produced for carers who are concerned about either their own or a brain injury survivor's mental health – this is available on our website at www.headway.org.uk/information-library.

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If you are a brain injury survivor and you are struggling with your mental health, we hope that this information is useful. Please remember that **help is available**.

Words in **bold and underlined** are defined in a glossary on page 13.

The information in this publication does not replace clinical guidance. You should always seek advice from a suitably qualified professional on managing the effects of brain injury. Your GP may be the best starting point for this.

You can also contact our nurse-led helpline for information and advice on living with brain injury on 0808 800 2244 or helpline@headway.org.uk.

What is mental health?

Mental health is a state of wellbeing that allows us to function and complete the activities that we want or need to do. It relates to how we think, feel and cope with the world around us. Everybody has mental health.

Experiencing difficult life circumstances or poor health can affect our emotions and behaviour, making us scared, low or anxious.

Sometimes this is short-term, and our emotions return to how they were once the stress has stopped. Some people may develop longer-term problems; if these get in the way of day-to-day life, they may be diagnosed as having a mental health or psychiatric condition.

It is possible for someone to have more than one mental health problem at the same time.

Below are some common mental health problems that can affect people after brain injury, along with their symptoms:

- **Depression** – a persistent feeling of sadness or loss of pleasure accompanied by reduced appetite, reduced interest in activities, lack of energy, avoidance of socialising and tearfulness, among other symptoms. Depression can be classified as mild, moderate or severe. **Psychosis** can be experienced by some people with severe depression.

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- **Anxiety** – a persistent feeling of worry, fear (being ‘on edge’) or tension. If someone has major and complex issues with anxiety, they may be diagnosed as having **generalised anxiety disorder**.
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder** – a form of intense anxiety in response to a highly stressful and traumatic life event, causing symptoms such as recurring flashbacks, nightmares and avoidance of anything that reminds the person of the trauma, among other symptoms.
- **Substance misuse** (alcohol, drug or medication use problems) – using alcohol, drugs and/or medication in a way that causes problems for the person themselves or others, sometimes to the point of dependence where it is difficult for them to cut down or stop, and they experience cravings and discomfort when they try.

Although often not considered a mental health problem in itself, lots of people with brain injury can struggle with excessive anger and irritability. This is a common effect of brain injury, but can also be triggered by anxiety and depression. Getting treatment for mental health problems can often help with these feelings as well.

More information on anger and irritability is available in our publication
[*Anger after brain injury.*](#)

There are less common mental health conditions that can affect people with brain injury, such as **bipolar disorder**, **schizophrenia**, **psychosis**, compulsive behaviours, and eating disorders, to name a few.

General information on a range of mental health conditions, including symptoms, diagnosis and treatment is available on the NHS website at www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions.

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How is mental health affected by brain injury?

A brain injury can affect mental health in a number of ways, for instance from:

- **direct damage to parts of the brain** involved in regulating feelings and behaviour;
- **living with the challenging impact of a brain injury** and finding it difficult to adapt to life after brain injury;
- **experiencing trauma**, for instance from the cause of the injury (such as being involved in a road traffic collision or being the victim of an assault), from the experience of being in hospital and undergoing invasive or painful procedures, or from experiences that happened after the injury.

Mental health can be affected regardless of the severity of the brain injury.

Mental health problems don't always start at the same time as the injury and may develop some time afterwards, even years later.

Example

Some brain injury survivors report symptoms of depression once they begin to understand the life-changing impact of the injury. Facing difficult circumstances such as being unable to return to work, losing one's driving licence, or finding that friends don't keep in touch as much, may contribute to this.

Not everyone develops mental health conditions after sustaining a brain injury. There are several factors that contribute towards whether or not someone is more likely to sustain a mental health issue after brain injury, including:

- age when the brain injury happened;
- mental health before the brain injury;
- family history of mental health problems;
- circumstances surrounding the injury itself (i.e. what happened when the injury occurred);
- location of injury within the brain.

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How is mental health diagnosed and treated after brain injury?

Many people experience periods of stress, worry, anger or sadness after a brain injury. These are common reactions to difficult life events, and often improve with changing circumstances or during the recovery period.

If you experience these feelings a lot of the time, for a long time, and they begin interfering with day-to-day life, you may be diagnosed as having a mental health condition and you may require treatment.

For any concerns about mental health after brain injury, you should start by **talking to a professional from brain injury services you are in contact with or your GP**. They might be able to provide a diagnosis and discuss treatment options, such as prescribing medication or referring you to appropriate psychological services. For instance, counselling and talking therapies can be effective for a range of mental health conditions.

If your mental health concerns are more severe and become severely disabling, you may be referred onto more specialised teams such as a **local community mental health team or psychiatry services**.

It may be possible to be referred onto a professional called a **neuropsychiatrist**. Neuropsychiatrists will have the appropriate specialist knowledge of how brain injury can cause psychiatric conditions and how best to treat this.

In some cases, it may be others around you that notice symptoms or express concerns about your mental health first. You may not feel like you need support for your mental health and feel irritated at family or friends who are encouraging you to get this help. Try to recognise that in some cases, a brain injury or mental health conditions can cause a **lack of insight** or interfere with your thinking skills, which may affect your ability to recognise the changes in your mental health and when you may need support. Have an open and honest discussion with your loved ones about how you are feeling, your concerns about asking for professional help, and how they can best support you.

If you are a relative, partner, friend or carer of a brain injury survivor and you ...

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... are concerned about a brain injury survivor's mental health, specific guidance on how you can help is available in our publication *Mental health after brain injury – for carers*.

Self-help tips for coping with mental health after brain injury

If you have serious concerns for your mental health or need life-saving support, visit your nearest Accident and Emergency department at hospital or call 999.

If you aren't sure whether or not you need urgent help, consider using the **NHS' mental health symptom checker triage service** at <https://111.nhs.uk/triage/check-your-mental-health-symptoms>. This will also tell you what you need to do next depending on your symptoms.

You can also call the **NHS 111** service for help with mental health crises or urgent mental health problems.

The following tips are general suggestions that may help you to cope with mental health problems after brain injury. These suggestions do not replace clinical guidance and may not be applicable to your particular mental health circumstances.

Access professional support

You should start off by discussing any mental health concerns you have with your GP, a professional from brain injury services (if you are in contact with one), or a local mental health service.

Your GP might prescribe medication, or refer you to either talking therapies, support groups or mental health/psychiatric services, depending on your needs.

If you feel nervous about getting help for your mental health, consider contacting a mental health charity helpline service first, or a trusted relative or friend. This can help you to become more familiar with having these conversations. Many of the organisations listed under *Useful resources* on page 11 have helplines or email

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services that you can contact. Most people who get help for mental health problems are pleased they went, even if they felt doubtful before going.

Talk to others about how you are feeling

Sharing your feelings with others can help you to feel less alone with your emotions, thoughts and behaviour. It may also help others to understand why your mood or behaviour may be different after your brain injury. You can use these discussions to advise others such as close friends, family and colleagues, on how they can best support you.

If you want to connect with other brain injury survivors, consider contacting your local Headway charity or volunteer-led branch, or using one of our online communities. More details on these are available on our website at www.headway.org.uk/supporting-you.

It can also be helpful to connect with others with similar mental health issues so that you can talk to others who understand your experiences.

Learn about brain injury

Learning about your brain injury and how it affects you can help you to make sense of your experiences and understand why things are difficult. It can also help you to find ways to manage some of the changes you are experiencing. For instance, some may find practical aids, such as home modifications, assistive devices, memory aids, building routines and breaking down tasks can be helpful. Having a greater sense of knowledge and control over your injury may lead to improvements in your mental health.

Headway's publications can be a helpful starting point with understanding the impact of brain injury. These are free to access and cover a wide range of information on the various effects of brain injury, as well as suggesting tips for coping. To access our publications, visit www.headway.org.uk/information-library.

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Take prescribed medication regularly

If you are taking prescribed medication to help with managing your mental health, make sure that you take your medication as prescribed. Never change the dosage without first discussing this with your GP.

If you have difficulties with remembering to take your medication, try some of the following strategies:

- cross days off on a calendar each time you take your medicine
- set alarms
- get into a routine of taking your medication at the same time each day
- ask others to remind you to take your medication
- use apps to remind you to take your medication
- use pillboxes to help you keep track of medications taken

Report any side effects or difficulties to the doctor who prescribed the medication.

Recognise that things can and do get better after brain injury

Experiencing a brain injury can cause significant life changes that can be difficult to accept and adjust to, especially in the early days. However, try to remember that things can and do improve for many people over time.

You could consider speaking to others affected by brain injury about how their life has improved, for instance by contacting your nearest Headway charity or volunteer-led branch, visiting our online communities or visiting our website *Brain injury and me*, which features testimonies from people affected by brain injury. For more information, visit www.headway.org.uk/supporting-you/

Do remember as well that symptoms of both mental health and brain injury can **fluctuate**, so that it is possible to have 'better' and 'worse' days. It is important to recognise even small victories to boost confidence and encourage continued progress. Identifying triggers can help with recognising patterns and being able to prepare for 'worse' days.

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Consider your triggers

There may be certain factors that trigger your episodes of mental health, for example situations that make you feel anxious or locations that are associated with the trauma surrounding your injury. Work with family, close friends and therapists to identify these and how best to cope.

It might be helpful to keep a diary with dates and details of what you were doing on days when your mental health has been particularly affected. This can help you to identify both triggers and patterns, which might also be helpful with diagnosing some forms of mental health conditions, as well as looking for opportunities to build coping strategies.

For some, the anniversary of their brain injury is a particularly triggering day. Try to plan supportive and positive activities to cope on this day in advance, such as arranging to spend time with close friends or doing something you enjoy to distract you from feeling upset.

If you consider using alcohol or drugs to help you cope with mental illness, try to remember that this has the opposite effect and worsens mental health, especially after brain injury.

For further information on why alcohol is generally discouraged after brain injury, including tips for coping, see our publication [Alcohol after brain injury](#).

Try relaxation techniques

Some mental health symptoms can be helped by learning relaxation techniques such as breathing techniques, mindfulness, meditation and spending time in nature. These techniques have also been found to be helpful with managing some of the effects of brain injury.

Visit the NHS' website for guidance on practicing these techniques.

- NHS guide to breathing exercises for stress: www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/breathing-exercises-for-stress
- NHS guide to mindfulness: www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness

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- NHS guide to meditation: www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-wellbeing-tips/how-to-meditate-for-beginners

Plan for mental health crisis episodes

If you have episodes of particularly challenging mental health symptoms, consider forming a plan in advance for how to deal with these. For instance, what would help you to feel better, where you can go and who you can contact.

Write your plan down and store it somewhere that you can easily access for when you need it. You might want to include mental health crisis or charity helpline phone numbers on your written plan.

Share your plan with others in your life so they are aware of how they can help you during these moments as well.

Have a healthy lifestyle

Having a healthy lifestyle includes getting enough good quality sleep, having meaningful rest, eating healthily and exercising.

Quality of sleep can often be affected by a brain injury. Tips for coping with this are available in our publication [Sleep problems after brain injury](#).

Brain injuries can lead to people feeling more fatigued, so having meaningful rest when it is needed is crucial to allow time for your brain and body to recover. Without this, it can worsen your ability to physically, mentally and emotionally cope.

Further information on fatigue and tips for coping are available in our publication [Fatigue after brain injury](#).

Guidance on eating well is available on the NHS website at www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well. For some, eating and drinking becomes difficult after brain injury if their sense of taste and smell has been impacted.

Tips for maintaining a healthy diet with taste and smell problems are available in our publication [Taste and smell issues after brain injury](#).

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Exercising can take many forms but may be difficult for survivors with physical effects of brain injury. It may be necessary to consult a **physiotherapist** for guidance on exercises that are safe to undertake.

Where to get further support for mental health after brain injury

You can ask about support for mental health in your local area by contacting your GP surgery.

There may also be an NHS mental health helpline in your local area that you can contact, or an NHS Talking Therapies service (previously known as Instant Access to Psychological Therapies). You can self-refer yourself to these, however you must be registered with a GP to do so. Contacting your GP can generally be a helpful starting point to help guide you as to what levels of support are available in your local area.

There are a number of mental health charities that offer helplines and additional services. Details of these are available at the end of this publication in the section *Useful resources*.

Conclusion

This publication has given information and guidance to people affected by brain injury on how mental health can be affected. We hope that you have found it a helpful resource and that it has given you suggestions of ways to cope with mental health problems after brain injury.

The organisations listed below can offer further guidance and support with mental health, while Headway's services can offer guidance and support on many other aspects of living with brain injury.

Useful resources

Hub of Hope – run by a charity called Chasing the Stigma, provides information on local mental health services in your area.

Web: www.hubofhope.co.uk

Helpline: 0808 800 2244
Email: helpline@headway.org.uk
Web: www.headway.org.uk



Headway's nurse-led helpline – offers information, support and a listening ear to people affected by brain injury

Tel: 0808 800 22244

Email: helpline@headway.org.uk

Web: www.headway.org.uk

Mind - a charity providing information and support people with mental health and wellbeing

Support line: 0300 102 1234

Infoline: 0300 123 3393

Welfare benefits line: 0300 222 5782

Legal line: 0300 466 6463

Email: info@mind.org.uk

Web: www.mind.org.uk

NHS 111 Check your mental health symptoms

<https://111.nhs.uk/triage/check-your-mental-health-symptoms>

Rethink Mental Illness – a charity providing information and advice for people severely affected by mental illness

Advice service: 0808 801 0525

Email: advice@rethink.org

Web: www.rethink.org

Samaritans – a charity providing support for people experiencing a crisis or struggling to cope, including having suicidal feelings

Helpline: 116 123

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Web: www.samaritans.org

Helpline: 0808 800 2244
Email: helpline@headway.org.uk
Web: www.headway.org.uk

Shout – a text service for people experiencing a mental health crisis and needing support

Text SHOUT to 85258

Web: <https://giveusashout.org/>

Glossary

Anxiety – a persistent feeling of worry, fear (being ‘on edge’) or tension.

Bipolar disorder – a condition in which a person experiences extreme mood swings, from intense highs (**mania** or hypomania) to deep lows (depression)

Depression - a persistent feeling of sadness accompanied by reduced appetite, reduced interest in activities, lack of energy, avoidance of socialising and tearfulness.

Fluctuate – regularly changing. Many of the effects of brain injury fluctuate; they may be especially problematic on some days but better on others.

Generalised anxiety disorder - a persistent feeling of fear, worry or unease, which can cause feelings of restlessness, panicking, problems with sleeping and repetitive behaviours, among other symptoms.

Lack of insight – being unable to observe and reflect on one’s own actions.

Mania – periods of extreme high energy, intense feelings of happiness and overactivity.

Neuropsychiatrist – doctors who specialise in psychiatric disorders caused by brain impairment.

Physiotherapist - a professional that assesses and offers exercises for movement issues after illness or injury.

Post-traumatic stress disorder - a form of intense anxiety in response to a highly stressful and traumatic life event, causing symptoms like recurring flashbacks, nightmares and avoidance of anything that reminds the person of the trauma, among other symptoms.

Psychosis – a state in which someone has trouble telling what is real or not, which can affect their beliefs, behaviour and senses.

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Schizophrenia - a form of **psychosis** in which a person has thoughts and ideas that are not based in reality, such as hallucinations and delusions.

Substance misuse – a condition in which a person is unable to control their use of substances such as alcohol, drugs or medication.

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As a charity, we rely on donations from people like you to continue being able to provide free information to those affected by brain injury. To donate, or find out how else you can get involved with supporting our work, visit www.headway.org.uk/get-involved.

If you would like to leave feedback for this publication, please consider completing our short survey at www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/hwpublications or contact us at publications@headway.org.uk.

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