

Managing anger

after brain injury



the brain injury association

 This booklet has been written for people who have had a brain injury and are now having trouble managing their anger. It is also intended for their families and carers.

■ Managing anger after brain injury

This e-booklet is an adaptation, created in March 2021, of the Headway print booklet *Managing anger after brain injury*.

published by



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We would like to thank all of the brain injury survivors and carers who contributed to this booklet by sharing their experiences of managing anger after brain injury.

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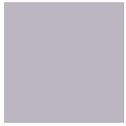


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Introduction



This booklet has been written for brain injury survivors who are now having trouble managing their anger. It is also for their families, friends and carers. It looks at what anger is, why brain injury survivors may experience more anger and suggests ways of managing it from day-to-day.

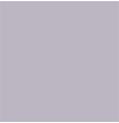
You will find some terms in **bold** type. These are defined in the [glossary on page 17](#), along with some other technical terms that you may hear from medical professionals or read in books.

The information in this booklet does not replace clinical guidance from medical professionals. If you feel that you or someone you know has a problem with managing anger then we would advise consulting a GP or rehabilitation professional. It may be possible to seek referral to a specialist. More information on specialist support is available further on in this booklet.

Remember, anger is a normal, natural emotional response and managing anger isn't about taking it away. It is about learning to control it rather than letting it control you.

We hope that after reading this booklet you will have a better understanding of anger and brain injury, and will have learned some new ways of coping.

What is anger?



Anger is a normal emotion that is a psychological reaction to something that makes us feel irritated, frustrated, threatened or anxious.

All emotions cause changes in our bodies. Anger makes your heart beat faster and may make you feel hot and restless. This is because your body is pumping out energy hormones (like **adrenaline**), physically preparing you in case you have to react.

One of the most basic human mechanisms is the fight-or-flight response. When presented with something that threatens or upsets us in some way, our bodies automatically prepare to either run from the situation (flight) or confront it (fight). Both of these reactions cause a sequence of hormone changes and physiological responses in the body. Anger is an emotion that triggers this process.

Inevitably there are times when things are out of our control and it is natural to feel frustrated. However, if we start to shout and blame others, it is important to be able to identify that this type of anger is unhelpful, and we should try to make a conscious effort to calm ourselves down.

Anger can be healthy if managed properly. This involves noticing that you are angry in the first place, keeping calm, and solving the problem in an assertive way. If you manage your anger in this way, other people may not even realise that you were angry at all.

Frustration, anger and aggression

Most people's anger begins with frustration, when something first starts to annoy or upset us. Frustration can build up slowly over time or quickly turn into anger depending on the circumstance and person.

Anger is an emotion that is experienced internally by the person themselves. It may cause changes in body language or tone of voice so that others notice when we are feeling angry.

Aggression is a behaviour that others can see, feel or hear. It occurs when the anger is directed towards someone or something.

Not all anger results in aggression, and not all cases of aggressive behaviour occur when the person is angry over something.

In rare cases, outbursts of aggression can happen with little or no trigger. It is important that this is properly looked into. In some instances, it may be diagnosed as '**episodic dyscontrol syndrome**', which can require drug treatment.

Anger after brain injury



The effects of brain injury often affect aspects of life such as employment, relationships and daily living. Many brain injury survivors experience frustration over these changes. They may be frustrated over not recovering as quickly as they would like to or because they can no longer do activities they enjoyed before their injury.

Coping with the effects themselves can also cause frustration, such as not being able to remember key dates due to memory problems, or not being able to say things clearly because of speech problems.

Injury to certain areas of the brain that are responsible for managing emotions, such as the **limbic system** and **frontal lobes** can cause problems with managing anger.

Anger is one of many emotions that someone is likely to feel after brain injury. Others include anxiety, depression, grief and loss. It is not only the brain injury survivor who will feel these emotions, but their family and carers as well. Out of all of these emotions, anger is probably the most confusing, hurtful and concerning for both the survivor and their family and friends.

In the early stages

In the very early stages of recovery from brain injury, for instance when the survivor is being treated in hospital, they may shout, swear and hit out at things and people. This kind of behaviour is particularly characteristic of a person who has just emerged from a period of unconsciousness and is experiencing **post-traumatic amnesia** (PTA). As well as displaying anger, the survivor may behave or talk in a bizarre or uncharacteristic manner.

Seeing a loved one display this sort of behaviour during PTA can be very distressing for family and friends. It is important to remember that this is a temporary and normal stage of recovery and that it will pass in time.

For more information and guidance on PTA, see our factsheet on this topic [*Post-traumatic amnesia*](#).

In the longer term

As the brain injury survivor recovers, their more lasting effects of brain injury will start to become apparent. Anger is a particularly common effect of brain injury. It can lead to unpredictable behaviour, which can be destructive and aggressive. While some people feel at the mercy of this powerful emotion, others barely notice its presence or impact.

Causes and triggers

In order to manage anger, it is important to be able to identify what is causing it. In some instances, there is an external cause or trigger, and removing this can help to reduce or remove the survivor's anger.

The following are some examples of commonly reported external causes or triggers of anger after brain injury:

- People not understanding or underestimating the impact of brain injury
- Consuming alcohol
- Busy, distracting environments
- Environmental factors such as temperature or noise
- Situations that require waiting such as in a queue or traffic
- Situations that make a survivor feel pressured or rushed

When the frustration or anger is caused by the effects of brain injury, it may be necessary to find ways to cope with these effects first.

- **Communication difficulties:** not being able to find the right words, or express them clearly or quickly enough can be a source of frustration. Taking the wrong meaning from a conversation or misreading facial expressions can also lead to frustration. Further information on this is available in the booklet *Coping with communication problems after brain injury*.
- **Attention, concentration and information processing:** many brain injury survivors need longer to make sense of what they see or hear. They may have problems understanding written or spoken information. When they realise that they are not keeping up with a conversation, television programme or activity, they may feel upset or angry.
- **Memory problems:** the brain injury survivor may be unable to remember important events in their lives or appointments. They may forget information from a few moments or a few days ago, causing frustration. Further information on this is available in the booklet *Memory problems after brain injury*.
- **Problem solving:** some brain injury survivors will have lost their ability to solve problems, so that even a simple problem becomes a large challenge. Being unable to complete simple tasks or things that the survivor did before their injury can lead to feelings of frustration and low self-esteem. This skill is part of a wider set of skills that can be affected by brain injury known as executive dysfunction. Further information on this is available in the factsheet *Executive dysfunction after brain injury*.

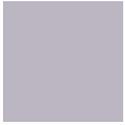
- **Personality change:** the changes caused by brain injury can make some people feel like a new person after their injury. When the survivor feels aware of this, it can be distressing and difficult to accept and this can be a cause of anger. Headway's *A New Me* report describes how brain injury can change a person's sense of self. You can read the report by visiting www.headway.org.uk/news-and-campaigns/campaigns/a-new-me.
- **Loss of inhibition:** The brain injury survivor may lose their sense of inhibition and say things which would be best kept as thoughts. This can lead to embarrassing social situations, as the survivor may say or do things that are socially inappropriate. Unfortunately many people in society do not have an understanding of brain injury so will not easily make allowances for such behaviour.

Often as a person becomes angry, it can make those around them feel angry. It is almost like 'catching' the anger. The two angry people may then start blaming each other and it will be difficult to calm the situation down. Furthermore, if a brain injury survivor lacks insight into their inhibition they may not understand why they have upset someone in the first place, and this can cause further anger. Further information on this is available in the Headway factsheet *Lack of insight after brain injury*.



Headway's Brain Injury Identity Card provides brain injury survivors with added confidence in handling these types of everyday social scenarios. For more information visit www.headway.org.uk/id

Tips for the brain injury survivor



This section has been written for brain injury survivors. It aims to help you with identifying how best to manage your anger.

There are two reasons why it is important to control your anger:

1. It can lead to aggressive or impulsive behaviour
2. It can affect your thinking and speaking – other effects of brain injury may worsen while you are angry

The following tips can help with identifying and managing anger. Remember that different things work for different people, so while some of the tips below may be helpful to you, others may be less effective. Try different things until you find a method that works for you.

Change your approach towards anger

- Try to become aware of the physical signs of anger building up such as rapid breathing, feeling hot and clenching fists. If you can learn to recognise these changes in your body, you might be able to calm yourself down before the anger becomes aggression.
- Anger can sometimes be caused by stress and anxiety. Learning ways to manage stress and anxiety in the first instance can help you to feel more relaxed and less likely to have an outburst of anger. Consider relaxation techniques such as mindfulness and meditation to help with managing stress and anxiety.

- Difficulties with accepting how different life is after brain injury can be a source of anger to some. However, learning to accept the 'new me' and finding new interests and strengths can help with improving feelings of frustration.
- Remember that as you practice using strategies for managing your anger, your responses may gradually become automatic and will become a natural part of how you think and behave. Also, as your confidence after brain injury increases, you may find you need to rely on consciously using strategies less and less.

Identify your triggers

- Being uncomfortable with the environment can cause irritation, which can gradually build up to anger. Examples include feeling too hot or too cold, loud noises, bright lights, being in a crowded place or being stuck in traffic. If possible, try to change the environment to help with calming yourself down.
- Try to have a regular sleep routine so that are getting enough sleep every night. Being tired can make people feel irritable, which can turn into anger if you get too tired through the day.
- Drinking alcohol after brain injury is discouraged because it can affect a survivor more than it did before their injury. They may be more likely to get into fights or feel angry at the impact of their injury under the influence of alcohol. For further information and advice on managing alcohol intake after brain injury, see the factsheet [Alcohol after brain injury](#).
- Some people find that their anger can be triggered by things they read on the news or on social media. Limit the amount of time you

spend online or watching the news and try to be selective about what information you view. Try to avoid getting into arguments online as they may cause unnecessary frustration.

Talk to others

- Talk to others about how you feel when you get angry. Being open and honest can help you to process your emotions and find a new way to think about managing your anger, while also allowing others around you to be more understanding.
- Educate others about your injury and how it has impacted you. You can show Headway's relationships factsheets to partners, friends or colleagues to help them with understanding the effects of brain injury and what they can do to help.
- Discuss your triggers with family, friends and colleagues so that they are also aware of the situations in which you may start to feel angry.
- If you are struggling with a return to work or education after brain injury and this is causing you to feel stressed, which in turn is making you angry, talk to your employer or tutor about how you are feeling and ask if there is any way to adapt things so that it is easier for you to manage. More information and tips on this are available in the factsheets *Returning to work after brain injury* and *Returning to education after brain injury*.

Seek professional support

- If you feel your anger is out of control, speak to your GP about getting a referral for professional support such as from a neuropsychologist or a cognitive behavioural therapist

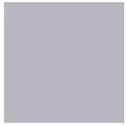
- Counselling may be suitable if you need to talk to someone about how you are feeling and any issues or incidents that are upsetting you
- If appropriate, consider getting professional support together with a partner or your family so that you can work together towards managing your anger
- Remember that you can talk to the nurse-led Headway helpline if you need emotional support or want to find out more about managing anger after brain injury. You can contact the helpline on **0808 800 2244** or **helpline@headway.org.uk**.

During an episode of anger

- Remove yourself from the situation that is causing you to feel angry, for instance leaving the room or ending a conversation. If you are with someone, explain that you are leaving because you need time to calm down and will return when you feel better.
- Use the analogy of a thermometer to explain how angry you are feeling. This is used by some rehabilitation teams to describe and visualise anger, with the different levels of anger being different points on the thermometer. It can start at irritation and move onto higher intensities of annoyance, frustration, anger, fury and rage. This can help to explain how you are feeling in the moment and can help with identifying and therefore managing the anger.
- Try to use calming techniques such as focusing on your breathing or practicing mindfulness

- Write down how you are feeling. Some people find that writing poetry or keeping a diary can be helpful.
- If possible, go for a walk or do some gentle exercises
- Listen to music that makes you feel better or calms you down
- Think of someone who normally calms you down when you feel angry. Imagine what they would say to you and what they would do to make you feel better.
- If your anger was directed at someone, apologise to them afterwards and explain how you felt. It may be difficult to say sorry, but it can help to clear up misunderstandings and often makes both people feel better.

Tips for family, friends and carers



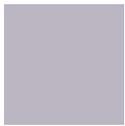
Witnessing someone having an anger outburst, or being on the receiving end of someone's anger can be very hard. It can be particularly hurtful if the anger is directed at family members, who are already upset and perhaps angry themselves.

The following points can be used by family, friends and carers to reduce the distress of everyone involved.

- Try to identify what triggers the survivor's anger, for instance certain environments or certain topics of conversation. If these situations come up again, be prepared and have a strategy ready to help the survivor with managing their anger.
- Discuss triggers that you have noticed with the survivor and help them to identify triggers themselves.
- Try to gently direct the survivor's attention away from the cause of their anger.
- Busy places can be especially difficult for brain injury survivors as they may struggle with processing all of the information around them. If you see them getting 'worked up', encourage them to move to somewhere quieter.
- Try not to get into an argument with the brain injury survivor. Instead make an effort to be calm and speak to them gently, even if you think they are wrong. Telling the survivor to just 'calm down' can sometimes make the situation worse. Instead, tell them that you can see they are starting to get angry and remind them to take deep breaths. You can also remind them that you can discuss things later.

- Never trivialise the survivor's anger, even if it is over something that seems small to you. Remember that sometimes simple things like watching people chatting freely can bring up feelings of sadness, which can subsequently lead to anger.
- Remove yourself from the area if the anger is being directed at you. Explain to the brain injury survivor that you are leaving because you think it will help them to calm down, rather than just walking away with no explanation.
- Remember that even if the anger is being directed at you, this is most likely not personal. Rather, it is a common effect of brain injury.
- Agree on a prompt or sign that you can use when you believe they are getting wound up. For example, you could blow over your shoulder, indicating "blow away your anger". You can also encourage the survivor to think of their own sign to show that they are starting to get angry.
- Remember that the Headway helpline is available to families, friends and carers of brain injury survivors as well as the survivor themselves. The helpline can be a listening ear or offer information and practical tips for supporting someone with anger problems after brain injury. You can contact the helpline on **0808 800 2244** or **helpline@headway.org.uk**
- If the brain injury survivor's anger becomes violent, abusive or causes a risk of harm to themselves, yourself or others, there may be a need to seek intervention through a safeguarding team, domestic abuse services or the police. The Headway helpline can offer emotional support and information if you need help with this.

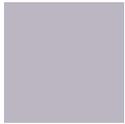
Conclusion

 **P**roblems with managing anger are common after brain injury. For many brain injury survivors with anger problems, becoming aware of the anger is the first step to managing it. The tips in this booklet can help brain injury survivors to both identify and manage their anger effectively, although for some people it may be necessary to seek professional support as well.

Families, friends and carers are often also affected by anger problems, and it is important for them to be aware of how best to support the brain injury survivor with managing their anger.

If you would like to discuss any of the issues raised in this booklet, or are seeking emotional support, contact the Headway helpline on **0808 800 2244** or **helpline@headway.org.uk**.

Glossary



■ Adrenaline

A chemical produced by the adrenal glands, which triggers the 'fight or flight' response.

■ Amygdala

An area of the limbic system that controls emotions such as fear and rage.

■ Cognition

A general term used to cover all areas of intellectual function

■ Cognitive behavioural therapy

Helps people to understand the relationship between their thoughts, feelings and behaviour. Provides practical help to reduce emotional distress and change problem behaviours.

■ Episodic dyscontrol syndrome

Condition causing outbursts of anger/rage with no obvious trigger.

■ Frontal lobes

Part of the cerebral cortex. Primarily concerned with planning and organising and controlling emotions and behaviour.

■ Limbic system

An area deep in the centre of the brain that houses the hypothalamus, hippocampus and amygdala and is involved in the control of emotions.

■ Mindfulness

A meditation technique in which a person makes a conscious effort to focus on their own thoughts, feelings and the world around them.

■ **Neuropsychologist**

A specialist in the assessment and rehabilitation of behavioural, emotional and cognitive problems caused by brain injury and other neurological conditions.

■ **Post-traumatic amnesia**

The period after being unconscious when there may be confused behaviour and no continuous memory of day to day events.

■ **Self monitoring**

The ability to notice and recognise our own emotions.

How to donate



Headway – the brain injury association is a registered charity (1025852) and relies upon voluntary support to fund its work.

If you would like to help Headway by making a donation you can do so by donating online at **www.headway.org.uk**, contacting the Fundraising Team on **0115 924 0800**, or sending a cheque to:

Headway – the brain injury association
Bradbury House
190 Bagnall Road
Old Basford
Nottingham NG6 8SF

About Headway

Headway – the brain injury association is a charity set up to give help and support to people affected by brain injury.

A network of local Headway groups and branches throughout the UK offers a wide range of services including rehabilitation programmes, carer support, social re-integration, community outreach and respite care. The Headway helpline provides information, signposts to sources of support and rehabilitation services, and offers a listening ear to those experiencing problems. Other services provided by Headway include:

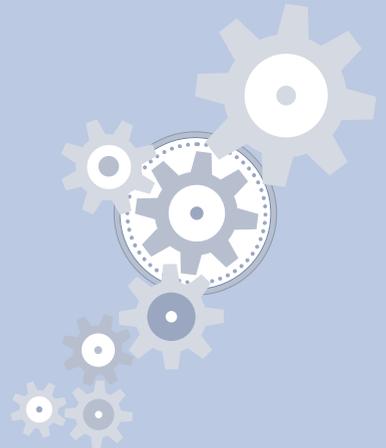
- Supporting and developing local groups and branches
- Promoting understanding of brain injury and its effects
- An award-winning range of publications on aspects of brain injury
- Accreditation of UK care providers through the Approved Provider scheme
- A comprehensive, award-winning website
- Campaigning for measures that will reduce the incidence of brain injury
- Providing grants from our Emergency Fund for families coping with financial difficulties
- Headway Acute Trauma Support (HATS) nurses to support families with loved ones in hospital
- Freephone helpline: 0808 800 2244
(Monday–Friday, 9am–5pm)
- Telephone: 01 15 924 0800
- Website: www.headway.org.uk
- Fax: 01 15 958 4446
- Email: helpline@headway.org.uk



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