



Returning to work after brain injury

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Introduction

Returning to work after brain injury is a necessity for some people and an optional choice for others. Some people may be keen to go back, while others may only be returning for financial reasons.

Furthermore, as job roles and the effects of brain injury vary so much from person to person, people affected by brain injury can have very different experiences of returning to work. Some people may struggle to return to a former role or workplace and accommodations may need to be made. For some, it may be necessary to find a new job altogether if they are no longer able to do their former job efficiently or safely.

Regardless of your personal circumstances, there is support available to assist with returning to work after brain injury. This factsheet has been written to offer you some useful information about this.

Some useful tips for coping with a return to work are also given to help with your returning to work experience.

The information provided in this factsheet is quite general in order to cover the wide range of different jobs that people can have. If you need more specialised advice or support, there are a number of organisations listed at the end that may be able to help.

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



Returning to a previous job or finding a new job

When returning to work it can be easier to return to a job that you know well rather than to try a new job. Familiarity of the role, colleagues and the working environment can all be helpful, although you may find that some aspects of the job require adjusting to accommodate for any new needs.

If you are looking for a new job, start off by considering what your strengths are and what you would enjoy doing. You should also factor in any effects of brain injury that you experience on a regular basis, as these might affect your performance in different ways. Some jobs may therefore be more suitable than others, depending on your personal circumstances.

Work psychologists, Disability Employment Advisors or, if you are in receipt of Universal Credit, Work Coaches, are based in Jobcentres and can help with finding suitable jobs based on your skills, abilities, previous employment and interests. This is called an employment assessment. For more information on this, contact your nearest Jobcentre.

Family, close friends, staff at Headway groups or branches and people who know you well will also be able to honestly discuss your options with you and can help you to figure out what would be suitable. They might also be able to help you with completing job applications.

Employers who have committed to employing people with a disability use the 'disability confident' symbol, so if you find an employer with this symbol there is a good chance they will be more understanding of and accommodating to the effects of brain injury.



Do remember that returning to work, whether to a previous job or a new job, can cause fatigue for many brain injury survivors, especially in the early days of returning. The extra and sustained concentration, thinking, moving and socialising that many jobs require can be tiring for the brain while it is still recovering from injury. Therefore, if you are looking for a new job, you might wish to consider searching for part-time roles to begin with.

Discussing your brain injury with your employer

You do not have to disclose or give details of your brain injury on a job application or to your employer, unless your brain injury has affected your ability to do the work safely. However, it can be advantageous to tell your employer for the following reasons.

Under the Equality Act 2010, employers have a "duty to make reasonable adjustments" to the workplace for a disabled employee, so having an open discussion about your brain injury can help with identifying and implementing useful adjustments.



It can also be helpful for employers to know about your brain injury so that they are more understanding of the effects of brain injury that may affect your work performance.

To start this discussion, you might wish to make a list of the effects of brain injury that you feel affect your work performance. You could take relevant [Headway publications](#) along with you and highlight any passages that you feel most strongly apply to you.

The Headway factsheet [Brain injury: a guide for employers](#) might be a particularly useful resource to share, as this has been written to improve employers' understanding of brain injury and what their legal responsibilities are.

Redeveloping skills to return to work

There are a number of organisations that can help people with a disability with finding work or getting advice about returning to work with a disability. Some of these are listed in the Useful organisations section on page 9.

You might also have an occupational therapist (OT) as part of your rehabilitation team with whom you can discuss returning to work and how to effectively do this. If you do not already have an OT, you can speak to your GP, nurse or social worker about getting a referral to one. You can also search for an OT in private practise from the Royal College of Occupational Therapist's website at www.rcotss-ip.org.uk/find.

Vocational rehabilitation (VR) is another scheme specifically designed to assist people with redeveloping the skills they need for employment. You can speak to your GP about accessing VR, or search for companies that deliver VR for instance from the Vocational Rehabilitation Association's website at www.vrassociationuk.com.

"I was told early on in my vocational rehabilitation (VR) to only go back when I am ready and my Occupational Therapist (OT)s thought I had the best chance to succeed. It was a long, frustrating journey to get to where I am, but I trusted what my OTs told me and I learned from other brain injury survivors not to return until I had gone through three amazing VR courses."

Governmental schemes to help with returning to work

There are a number of schemes set up by the government that are designed to assist people with finding or returning to work. Some of these are listed below.

Access to Work

This is a grant that can be used to assist with the payments towards specialist equipment needed within the workplace, or travelling to and from work. You can check your eligibility or apply for this grant from the government's website at www.gov.uk/access-to-work/apply.



You can also call the Access to Work helpline:

Telephone: 0800 121 7479

Textphone: 0800 121 7579

If you cannot hear or speak on the phone, dial 18001 then 0800 121 7479

Available Monday - Friday, 8am - 7.30pm

Intensive Personalised Employment Support and Specialist Employability Support

These are schemes that provide specialised support and training to people with a disability who are looking for work. More information on these schemes are available at www.gov.uk/intensive-personalised-employment-support or by contacting your nearest Jobcentre.

Work and Health Programme

This is a voluntary scheme that provides assistance with finding and keeping a job. More information on this is available at www.gov.uk/work-health-programme or by contacting your nearest Jobcentre.

Tips for preparing to return to work

Only return when you're ready

One of the most common problems faced by brain injury survivors when returning to work is that they return too soon because they do not realise how the effects of their brain injury will impact on their work. This is a particular issue when a good physical recovery has been made, as people often assume that cognitive abilities have also improved. However, returning to work often reveals the full extent of difficulties and returning too soon can damage confidence if performance doesn't meet expectations.

Try to avoid stressful situations

It is advisable to avoid making major decisions and becoming involved in stressful situations until you feel you are ready. This is especially the case in jobs with high levels of stress and pressure and where margins for error are small. Mistakes made because of the injury could damage your confidence and hinder your recovery.

Try not to take on any overtime, shift work or new responsibilities until you feel ready, as these could also cause stress.

Consider returning to work gradually

You could consider returning to work on a phased-return basis, for example starting part-time, only working during mornings or evenings (depending on when you perform your best) or working shorter hours. You can even consider asking to work from home to begin with.

Legally, all employees who have worked for the same employer for at least 26 weeks have a right to ask for this 'flexible working'. Even if you have not worked for your employer for



this length of time, you could still have an informal discussion about returning to work gradually at a pace that suits you.

"I went back very gradually on a phased return which worked well, but I was always wanting and pushing to do more than I should have done (hindsight is a wonderful thing) The biggest thing that I learnt was understanding where my (new) limitations were, and how I had changed overnight. After that it was learning to adjust to these changes. A lot was physical, coping with fatigue, but a big chunk was coping with new found sensory overload."

Be positive, but realistic

The attitude you have towards returning to work is very important.

Thinking positively does not just mean saying, "I will go back to work", but rather it means carefully considering and planning the best options. It means asking yourself, "what can I do?", "what am I going to have difficulty with?" and "how will I manage the problems?"

There is a balance to be found between positivity and realism. Unrealistic expectations can lead to disappointment and loss of self-esteem, and it is very important to think carefully about the effects of the injury and their impact on your abilities. However, it is equally important to be positive and committed in the path you choose to follow.

Communicate with your employer

Make sure you keep in contact with your employer while you are away. You might wish to ask a family member or a friend to do this for you if it is difficult to keep contact yourself.

Make sure you understand your sick pay entitlement and do not be afraid of discussing this with your employer. More information about this is available on the government website at www.gov.uk/statutory-sick-pay.

If you have a Disability Employment Advisor or a relevant healthcare professional, you could ask if they would be willing to talk to your employer or send them a letter outlining how your brain injury might affect you in the workplace.

Make sure that your employer is aware of any legal implications of your brain injury, such as if you have been told that you cannot drive due to an increased risk of epilepsy. This may also mean that you need to take other precautions at work.

Communicate with your colleagues

Again, it is up to you whether you tell colleagues about your brain injury and its effects. If you are returning to your previous job then they will know you have been away, so it can be better to tell them something about the situation. Don't feel that you have to share anything you aren't comfortable with, but it will help people to understand and make some allowances if you are as honest as possible.



You could consider asking your employer or any friends you have within work to brief other colleagues in advance.

You could also arrange an induction process, so that you have a chance to meet with your colleagues and tell them anything you would like them to know about your brain injury before you formally start.

Practice a 'structured home programme'

A few weeks before you start working again, try to implement a 'structured home programme' that aims to mimic a working week. This could involve waking up at the time you would need to wake up when being back at work, practising tasks you will be doing at work, practising getting to and from work (for instance getting a bus at certain times or driving down certain routes during working hours), or practising activities that could help you to develop your concentration, memory or decision-making skills.

Make sure it is safe for you to return to work

Before attempting to return you may need to make sure your GP agrees and that you will be covered by your employer's insurance. Your employer may need to do an occupational health assessment. Small and medium sized companies that don't have an occupational health department may be able to get help for this from NHS Health at Work. For more information, visit www.nhshealthatwork.co.uk.

Tips for being back at work

- Take breaks through the day, especially if you feel that you are getting fatigued. Depending on the nature of your job, you might be able to occasionally take a few minutes away to rest when you feel you need to. If you regularly need longer than a few minutes, speak to your employer about this. While there is no legal requirement to provide rest facilities in the workplace for people with a disability, you might wish to speak to your employer about whether there are any quiet rooms or areas that you can rest in when you need to.

"Went back to work after 3 months, I was allowed what hours I felt able to do, started with 2 hours a day and if I felt tired, was provided an area to lie down and rest before going home, after 5 months I was back up to full-time. Took the stress away from trying to rush back. Took the stress away from trying to rush back. I was very lucky. 5 years on, still full-time."

- Speak to your employer about reducing your workload, for instance taking away some of your responsibilities so that you can focus your attention on key tasks.
- Seek support from family and close friends during your return. This could be through practical support, such as offering lifts to travel to and from work, cooking meals or helping with childcare if you are a parent. Talk to your family and friends if you need emotional support, for instance if you are feeling stressed or nervous. Remember



that accepting help from others is a sign of strength, not weakness, and the right support can make a successful return to work easier.

- If it is not possible for you to return to your former role, there may be other roles within the same employment that are more suitable for you - talk to your employer about this.

"I returned to work 7 months after my injury, and worked phased return to try to work full-time, but I didn't succeed, so remained part-time, but over the years have increased that. I'm not doing the same job but with support I have an important role, now I manage data rather than staff."

- Use compensatory strategies and external aids to help with staying organised and remembering things. Many people use external memory aids, regardless of whether they have a brain injury or not - some examples include diaries, calendars, alarms or post-it notes. It is important to remember that this isn't cheating, and using external memory aids will not prevent any natural improvement of memory. For more suggestions, see the Headway booklet [Memory problems after brain injury](#).
- Learn to prioritise your workload so that you tackle more demanding or important tasks at times of the day when you are at your most alert.
- Get regular feedback from your employer and colleagues. The effects of brain injury mean you may not always be able to accurately assess your own performance, so it can be a good idea to have somebody else help you to monitor your progress, identify problems and provide feedback. Regular monitoring and feedback can help to identify and address problems as quickly as possible.
- If you feel that you are struggling or experience problems, remember that it is better to address these and ask for help as soon as they occur.
- Remember that sometimes problems can occur that are not due to your injury and are just a regular part of working life.
- Try to think of all feedback that you get in a positive way, even if you have made mistakes. Treat mistakes and negative feedback as part of the learning process.

Unfair treatment at work

If you feel that you have been unfairly treated at work, you should always start off by trying to talk directly to the person with whom you have a complaint against.

You may also have a Human Resources department within your organisation which can help.



The organisations ACAS is also available to provide free, impartial advice about employment matters and disputes. Their contact details are available in the Useful organisations section on page 9.

More guidance on this issue is available in the Headway factsheet [Making a complaint about treatment at work](#).

Alternative options to returning to work

If you have attempted to return to work but have found that it is simply too difficult, even after adaptations have been made, it may be that you need to consider alternative options. This might be on a temporary basis, or more of a long-term decision if your brain injury has seriously affected your ability to work, but it is important to do what feels right for you and not to rush back into work if you don't feel you are ready for it.

Alternative options that you could consider are:

- Volunteering - this is a great way to practise skills that would be useful within the workplace and can be very rewarding. Volunteer placements are often much more flexible as you can generally choose working times and jobs that suit you. For more information on this, see the Headway factsheet [Volunteering after brain injury](#).
- Enrol in a course - you could either enrol in an educational course, such as through a college, to gain qualifications for future employment, or through an organisation that helps people with a disability with developing skills to work. Some of these are listed in the Useful organisations section on page 9. More information on this is available in the Headway factsheet [Returning to education after brain injury](#).
- Self-employment - some people become self-employed because it allows more flexibility and control over your pace of work. However, being self-employed does come with other responsibilities, and employment rights are different. For more information on this, see the Headway factsheet [Self-employment after brain injury](#).

If you are unable to work, you may be entitled to welfare benefits. More information on this is available in the Headway booklet [A guide to welfare benefits](#).

Conclusion

The experience of returning to work after brain injury can vary for survivors depending on their personal circumstances such as what effects they experience from their injury and what line of work they are returning to. With adaptations and support, it can be possible to return, and we hope that some of the information in this factsheet has helped you with finding ways of making a return to work easier.

To talk through any of the information in this factsheet, you can contact the Headway

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



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.

Useful organisations

ACAS - provides free, impartial advice on workplace rights, rules and best practise
Helpline: 0300 123 1100
Web: www.acas.org.uk

Disability Jobsite - helps people with a disability to look for a job
Web: www.disabilityjobsite.co.uk

Momentum skills - provides training and employment to people with disabilities
Tel: 0141 419 5299
Email: headoffice@momentumuk.org.uk
Web: www.momentumskills.org.uk

National Careers Service - provides face-to-face advice to help with making decisions about training and work
Tel: 0800 100 900
Email: www.nationalcareers.service.gov.uk

Remploy - assists people with finding and returning to work
Tel: 0300 456 8110
Email: employmentservices.osc@remploy.co.uk
Web: www.remploy.co.uk

The Shaw Trust - assists people with gaining education, entering work or developing their career
Tel: 0300 30 33 11
Email: support@shaw-trust.org.uk
Web: www.shaw-trust.org.uk

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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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