



Depression after brain injury

Headway's publications are all available to freely download from the information library on the charity's website, while individuals and families can request hard copies of the booklets via the helpline.

Please help us to continue to provide free information to people affected by brain injury by making a donation at www.headway.org.uk/donate. Thank you.

Introduction

Sustaining a brain injury can be a very difficult thing for anyone to go through. Emotions such as anger, fear, sadness and worry are all common in the immediate and early days of the injury. While some people may gradually learn to adjust to the changes that their injury has brought about, others may feel a deep sense of loss and sadness that troubles them for weeks, months or even years. How profoundly these emotions affect a person's day-to-day living can be telling of whether they have depression.

This factsheet has been written for brain injury survivors who are experiencing depression as a result of their injury. It describes what depression is, how to cope with it and where to seek help. A list of useful organisations can be found at the end of the factsheet. More information on other psychological issues can be found in the Headway booklet *Psychological effects of brain injury*.

Remember that the Headway helpline is available to talk about any of the issues that you read about in this factsheet. The helpline can also offer emotional support if you just need to talk to someone about how you are feeling. You can contact the helpline on 0808 800 2244 or email helpline@headway.org.uk.

What is depression?

Many people think that being depressed means feeling 'low' or sad. However, this is not strictly true, and it is very important to make a distinction between sadness and depression.

Feeling sad is normal after a distressing event, such as a brain injury. If you find yourself struggling with these feelings, or if they have been going on for a long time, this may be a sign that you are feeling depressed.

Other common symptoms of depression include a loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed, changes to your sleeping or eating patterns, feeling low in self-esteem and experiencing lots of negative thoughts. In some cases, some people also have suicidal



feelings.

Depression can be difficult to live with because it can impact on various aspects of one's life. Loss of interest in socialising with others may lead the person with depression to becoming socially isolated, so that they gradually lose the supporting network around them of friends and family. Or, for instance, there may be problems with concentrating on or motivating oneself to work, causing the person with depression's work performance to fall below their usual standard.

Depression after brain injury

Depression is very common after brain injury, with roughly 50% of people experiencing depression during the first year of their recovery. As outlined above, depression can affect a person's ability to feel motivated; this in turn may have a negative impact on their ability to take part in rehabilitation activities, which may lead to a slower recovery.

People may experience depression after brain injury following changes in the brain itself, for instance if the parts of the brain that control emotions are injured. Depression can also develop as the brain injury survivor begins to realise the impact that the injury has had on their life, as the loss of former skills can be very difficult to accept and adjust to.

Diagnosing depression after brain injury

Many of the symptoms of depression are similar to the effects of brain injury, such as fatigue or lack of motivation, so it might be hard to tell whether someone with a brain injury does in fact have depression.

A constant low mood and lack of energy or interest in life might be telling of depression, among other symptoms listed earlier in this factsheet. If you are struggling to identify symptoms of depression in yourself, consider talking to a close friend or family member about how you are feeling, and ask them if they have noticed any of the symptoms listed earlier.

You can also use the NHS 'mood checker' to help with identifying whether you have depression. To access the mood checker, visit www.nhs.uk/Tools/Pages/Mood-self-assessment.aspx.

If you are feeling depressed, there are a number of self-help tips that can help with managing depression (listed in the following section *Self-help tips for coping with depression*.) However, if depression is having a serious impact on your life, or if you are feeling suicidal, it is important to seek professional support. More information on this is available in the section *Professional support*.



Self-help tips for coping with depression

If you are feeling depressed, there are a few things that can help you to cope on a day-to-day basis. Two general important points to remember are:

1. **Remind yourself that these feelings are normal.** Some people with depression may feel guilty about their negative thoughts. However, it is a completely natural response to feel grief, shock, fear and sadness following something as profound as brain injury. Remember that there is nothing 'weak' about being depressed, and try to take care that you do not fall into a self-critical thought pattern.
2. **There is help available.** It is hoped that the tips below can help you to manage your depression. However, don't be afraid to seek help from family, close friends, colleagues or supportive organisations such as Headway. There are also professionals that can help in various ways. More information on this is available in the section *Professional support*.

The following tips might help you with coping with depression. Do remember that these are just suggestions, and you may find that while some of them are useful, others are not. Different things work for different people and will depend on the effects of your injury and your own interests, so while there is no right or wrong way to manage depression, consider trying some of the following tips:

- **Talk to your family or friends about how you are feeling.** This is important to ensure that they don't misinterpret your moods as being disinterested. If it's too difficult to speak to them about how you feel, or if you are struggling to express yourself, try to find other ways of communicating such as writing a letter. This can allow you to take your time with finding words to describe your thoughts. Do also consider talking to your employer about depression if you feel that it is having an impact on your work performance.
- **Try not to become socially isolated.** It is important to spend at least some time socialising with people on a face-to-face basis. If you are unable to attend large gatherings, ask a friend to meet with you at a quiet location such as at your house or a local park. Alternatively, consider finding a local support or activity group that you can attend to meet new people and try out new activities, such as a local Headway group or branch.
- **Engage in activities that you enjoy doing** such as listening to uplifting music, creating art, or reading a book. Research indicates that these activities can be useful ways of coping with depression. If you haven't done these kind of activities before, consider trying them out.



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- **Educate yourself on the effects of brain injury.** Understanding your brain injury may be the first step towards accepting it, which might help with managing depression. Headway's publications offer information on the effects of brain injury, as well as offering tips on managing the effects. For more information, visit www.headway.org.uk/information-library.
- **Try to exercise for a few minutes every day.** This may be difficult if you experience fatigue or have limited mobility. However, exercise is a proven method of improving low mood. Try to set yourself a routine, for example taking a short walk around the neighbourhood in the morning, or doing some gentle stretches for five minutes every afternoon. Some useful tips on exercising for depression can be found on the NHS website at the following link: www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/pages/exercise-for-depression.aspx
- **Seek support from other services** such as the Headway helpline or your local Headway support group/branch. There are also depression-specific support groups, where people can get peer support from others who are also affected by depression, although these tend to be non-brain injury specific. Depression support organisations are listed in the section *Useful organisations*.
- **Identify issues in your life that may be causing or contributing to the depression**, for example if you are experiencing financial or relationship problems, and seek support for these. Headway's publications offer information on a number of different issues that can affect life after brain injury. For more information, visit www.headway.org.uk/information-library.
- **Consider putting together a 'soothe box'**. This is a box that contains personal items that may make you feel better and cope when you are feeling depressed. For more information and ideas of what to include in a soothe box, visit www.getselfhelp.co.uk/emergency.htm
- **Consider wellbeing techniques** such as mindfulness, yoga, meditation or other relaxation techniques. Although there is limited research to prove their effectiveness, brain injury survivors often report benefiting from them. Speak to a therapist if you are considering trying any of these techniques out, as they may be able to guide you through learning how to effectively use them.
- **Maintain a healthy lifestyle.** This involves maintaining a healthy diet, drinking plenty of water, avoiding alcohol and trying to ensure that you have a good night's sleep. For more information, visit NHS Choices 'Live well' website at www.nhs.uk/livewell/Pages/Livewellhub.aspx



Professional support

There are a number of different professionals that can support someone who is depressed. However, it is best to seek support from a professional who specialises in brain injury. The professionals best suited to this are Clinical Neuropsychologists or Clinical Psychologists who specialise in brain injury; these professionals specialise in the assessment and intervention of behavioural, emotional and cognitive problems caused by brain injury.

Counselling can also be very helpful for people with depression. Counsellors can help by encouraging their client to talk about their feelings. They can also assist with exploring what causes the feelings and how best to manage them.

You can access these professionals through a GP referral or privately. The Headway helpline can help with finding details of private therapists in your area.

In some instances you may be able to self-refer yourself to a local psychological therapy service. Your GP can help you with finding details of services available in your area, or you can browse through the information available on the NHS website at www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression.

Medication

Some people benefit from taking medication for their depression, either alongside or instead of talking therapy.

There are various different types of antidepressants that work by targeting different types of chemicals in the brain or altering chemical activity in different ways. The two most commonly prescribed types of antidepressants are **selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)** and **serotonin-noradrenalin reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs)**.

Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors- these are one of the most commonly prescribed types of antidepressants. They work by increasing levels of serotonin, a chemical in the brain that is responsible for feeling good. SSRIs are commonly prescribed because they have fewer side effects than other antidepressants.

Serotonin-noradrenalin reuptake inhibitors - these antidepressants are similar to SSRIs although they alter the activity of serotonin and another chemical called noradrenalin.

Nearly all antidepressants have side effects. These can be difficult to cope with, especially



if they worsen other effects of your brain injury, such as fatigue. Different medications have different side effects, but some common ones are:

- Dry mouth
- Tiredness
- Headache
- Constipation
- Dizziness
- Nausea or being sick
- Low sex drive
- Changes in eating patterns
- Anxiety or nervousness
- Visual problems

Antidepressant side effects can subside over the course of taking the medication. You should speak with your GP if you feel that the side effects are not getting better or if they are having a very negative impact on your life. You should also speak to your GP if you feel that the antidepressant is not working, although do consider that it is normal for medication to only start taking effect after a number of weeks.

It is very important that you do not stop taking or reduce the dosage of your medication without instruction from a medical professional. If you are having problems with your medication, speak to your GP as soon as possible.

Suicidal thoughts

Some people's depression can be severe enough to make them feel suicidal. This is characterised by extremely negative thoughts about oneself or the future and may often lead to someone thinking about or attempting to end their own life. If you are feeling suicidal, remember that you do not have to go through your suicidal feelings alone - **help is available**.

If you are experiencing occasional thoughts of suicide, talk to a family member or close friend that you trust, or speak to Samaritans on their 24 hour support line on 116 123 or jo@samaritans.org. The team at Samaritans are trained to support people who are feeling suicidal, so they will treat your contact with confidence and will not judge you. You can also ring the Headway helpline to talk about how you are feeling or get guidance on what to do to manage your suicidal thoughts. The helpline is available on 0808 800 2244 (Monday - Friday, 9am-5pm) or helpline@headway.org.uk.

You should also consider telling your GP or other professional (such as your Clinical Neuropsychologist, Clinical Psychologist or counsellor) if you are feeling suicidal. Even if you do not think that you will actually act on your suicidal thoughts, it is important for them to understand how you are feeling.



If you are having recurring thoughts of suicide, ring Samaritans or the Headway helpline and talk to them about how you are feeling. You should also consider making an urgent appointment with your GP, or contacting NHS 111 to explain how you're feeling.

If you think that you are about to commit suicide, go to your nearest Accident and Emergency (A&E) department or ring 999 if you do not think you can get to your nearest A&E.

Remember that while the greatest visible recovery after brain injury occurs in the first six months of injury, many people continue to recover many months or even years afterwards. Therefore although you may be feeling that you cannot face the future now, this might get better over time, especially with support from family, close friends and/or professionals.

Useful organisations

The following organisations provide support to people experiencing depression:

- **Depression UK**
Web: www.depressionuk.org
Email: info@depressionuk.org
- **Samaritans**
Web: www.samaritans.org
Tel: 116 123
Email: jo@samaritans.org
- **Mind - the mental health charity**
Web: www.mind.org.uk
Tel: 0300 123 3393
Email: info@mind.org.uk
- **Rethink Mental Illness**
Web: www.rethink.org
Tel: 0121 522 7007
Email: info@rethink.org
- **Sane**
Web: www.sane.org.uk
Tel: 0300 304 7000
Email: info@sane.org.uk

Do bear in mind that these organisations provide non-brain injury specific support for



depression, but can still be very useful. For brain injury specific support, consider contacting a Clinical Neuropsychologist, or a Clinical Psychologist or counsellor with experience in brain injury.

You can search for counsellors in your area using the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy's search tool at www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk/therapists.

Conclusion

Depression is a very common experience after brain injury. However, with the right support and information, and over time, some people can improve or learn to manage their depression on a day-to-day basis. It is very important to seek support for depression early on, for instance from a Clinical Neuropsychologist, Clinical Psychologist or a counsellor. Close friends and family can also be key sources of support. Headway support groups/branches, or other depression-specific support groups can provide local support and give you an opportunity to talk to others with similar experiences.

To discuss any issues raised in this factsheet, or to find details of our local groups and branches, please contact the Headway helpline free of charge on 0808 800 2244 (Monday - Friday, 9am-5pm) or by email at helpline@headway.org.uk.

You can also find more information and contact details of groups and branches on our website at www.headway.org.uk/supporting-you.

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to Dr Clíodhna Carroll and Dr Elizabeth Kent, Clinical Psychologists at Kent and Medway NHS and Social Care Partnership Trust, Clinical Neuropsychology Service, for their substantial contribution to this factsheet. Many thanks as well to the brain injury survivors who kindly commented on draft versions of this factsheet.

First published May 2017. Next review due January 2018.

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