Headway – the brain injury association

Action for Brain injury Week 2026: *We see you*

Short read summary

Introduction

A brain injury is a life-changing experience, often affecting the opportunities that brain injury survivors and carers have to participate and thrive in society. Common experiences after brain injury, such as being unable to return to work or struggling to cope in busy environments can often result in them becoming socially isolated. Carers of brain injury survivors are often similarly affected. A typical consequence of social isolation is loneliness.

In April 2026, Headway ran a series of surveys to better understand the experiences of social isolation among brain injury survivors and carers. We investigated how brain injury affects social life, social personality and social opportunities, as well as exploring which specific effects of brain injury cause the most interference with socialising.

We also investigated the role of technology in socialising before and since brain injury.

Furthermore, we explored the impact of attending a Headway service on wellbeing measures such as independence and confidence.

Key findings

- **Loneliness is commonly experienced after brain injury.** Almost 90% of brain injury survivors (87%) and carers (85%) feel lonely after brain injury despite never having felt lonely before the injury.

- **Social activity changes after brain injury.** Around half of all brain injury survivors (56%) and carers (51%) are no longer socially active following brain injury, despite having been socially active pre-injury.

- A third of survivors (33%) and carers (36%) who were socially active before the injury feel they have no choice over their withdrawal from socialising since the injury.

- **Social personality changes after brain injury.** 58% of brain injury survivors and 35% of carers feel shy and introverted in social settings since the injury -

despite regarding themselves as outgoing and confident before the injury.

- **Social groups change after brain injury.** Only around a third of brain injury survivors (31%) and carers (38%) maintain the same social circles as they did pre-injury.

- **Isolation is experienced within various social groups.** 83% of brain injury survivors and 69% of carers feel isolated from friends after brain injury, including those made both before and since the injury.

- Just over a third of survivors (36%) and carers (35%) feel isolated from their own families.

- Over a third of survivors (46%) and carers (36%) feel isolated from wider society. Isolation can be experienced even while socialising among these groups, for instance due to lack of understanding from others.

- **Social activity participation changes after brain injury.** Almost two thirds of survivors (63%) and just under half of carers (45%) are unable to participate in the same social activities as they did pre-injury.

- 32% of survivors and 24% of carers are no longer invited to social events, and around a third are no longer contacted by others (38%; 31%).

- Being unable to work is a significant barrier to socialising for many brain injury survivors (41%).

- Fatigue, memory problems and anxiety are the most detrimental effects of brain injury to socialising.

- **The impact of attending a local Headway is positive.** 72% of survivors and 71% of carers who attended a local Headway charity or volunteer-led branch felt that attending helped them to feel less lonely by helping them to connect with others, giving them space to be themselves, directing them to services they otherwise may not have found and giving them a sense of purpose and direction.

- 66% of survivors and carers who attended a local Headway felt that attending improved their emotional wellbeing.

- 63% of survivors and 56% of carers who attended a local Headway felt that attending improved their confidence.

- 51% of survivors and 34% of carers who attended a local Headway felt that attending improved their independence.

Key themes

- Brain injury survivors and carers experience a profound reduction in social activity post-brain injury, often not by choice. Many report no longer being invited, contacted, or included in social events.

- Strong feelings of loneliness, isolation, and disconnection are widespread among brain injury survivors and carers after brain injury. Frequent language includes “unseen”, “unheard”, “left behind”, “misunderstood”. Loneliness is often described as persistent, even when around others.

- There is a common loss of social confidence and identity among brain injury survivors and their carers after brain injury, with a clear shift from being outgoing and confident to shy, introverted, anxious, or low in confidence. Many describe grief for their “old self” and difficulty accepting a changed identity. Some feel embarrassed, burdensome, or afraid of being judged.

- Loss of friends and work colleagues is very common after brain injury. Families are often the main remaining social connection, but they are not always supportive. Some people form entirely new social circles, often through disability-specific or peer groups.

- Fatigue is the single most cited effect of brain injury acting as a barrier to socialising. Other frequent barriers include memory problems, communication / word-finding difficulties, slow processing and overstimulation (noise, crowds, multiple conversations).

- For carers, caring responsibilities dominate life. Time, fatigue, emotional strain, and unpredictability of the cared for person severely limit their ability to socialise, spontaneity and confidence to attend events.

- Many now prefer one-to-one or very small, quiet groups. This dramatically limits accessible social opportunities.

- Technology helps some people stay connected (online groups, messaging, video calls). Others find technology confusing, cognitively exhausting or inaccessible due to memory problems, visual problems, tremor, or fatigue.

- There is a strong preference for face-to-face interaction, but online support is valuable when energy or travel is limited.

- “Hidden disability” is a dominant theme. Respondents feel others underestimate their difficulties because they “look fine”. This leads to withdrawal, mistrust, and frustration with friends, professionals, and society.

For questions and enquiries about the survey and this report, please contact our Publications and Research Manager at publications@headway.org.uk.

For press enquiries, please contact media.office@headway.org.uk.

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