Headway
the brain injury association

Anger

after brain injury

This publication discusses anger after brain injury. It describes why a brain injury survivor may feel more angry or have difficulties with controlling their anger after their injury.

It shares common triggers for anger after brain injury. It also suggests tips for coping with anger after brain injury, and offers guidance on keeping safe.

This publication is also available as a printed booklet, which can be purchased from our online shop.

www.headway.org.uk
0808 800 2244

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What is anger?

Anger is a normal, natural emotional response to something that has upset us, threatened us or made us feel anxious or annoyed. There is often a 'trigger' that causes us to feel angry.

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 automatically pumping out energy hormones such as adrenaline, physically preparing you in case you have to react.

Feelings of anger can show in different ways:

- Anger can start off as a mild feeling of **irritation or frustration**, when something first starts to annoy, upset or worry us.

- **Aggression** is a behaviour that comes from feelings of anger. It can be seen, felt or heard through behaviours such as hitting or shouting. The anger is often directed towards someone or something.

- A person can become **violent** from their anger, causing them to be at risk of harming themselves or others.

Not all anger results in aggression, and not all causes of aggressive behaviour happen when the person is angry over something. In rare cases, outbursts of aggression or violence can happen with little or no trigger. It is important that this is properly looked into. The outbursts may be diagnosed as episodic dyscontrol syndrome, which could require treatment with medication.

Causes of anger after brain injury

Anger is a common effect of brain injury. Below are some of the reasons why a brain injury survivor might feel angry or struggle with managing their anger.

- A brain injury survivor first emerging from a period of unconsciousness might show aggressive behaviour such as shouting, swearing or hitting out at things and people. This is a temporary phase called **post-traumatic amnesia (PTA)** and is a normal part of the recovery process. More information on PTA is available in our publication *Post-traumatic amnesia*.

- A survivor may feel angry about **circumstances surrounding their injury**, such as if they were the victim of an accident or assault.

- A survivor with **communication difficulties** might feel frustrated about not being understood.

- A survivor might feel frustrated over **life changes after brain injury**, such as being unable to return to work, struggling with aspects of daily living, having their driving license revoked or experiencing changes in their relationships.

- A survivor might feel frustrated about **not recovering from their brain injury as quickly as they would have wanted to**. Many people do not realise that a brain injury can take months or years to recovery from rather than days or weeks.

- A survivor might feel frustrated if they can **no longer independently look after themselves** or do activities they enjoy. Relying on others can be frustrating.

- **Living with the various effects of brain injury** can also cause frustration.

- Difficulties with managing anger might also be the result of **injury to parts of the brain responsible for processing emotions**, such as the limbic system and frontal lobes.

Anger is just 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, friends and carers as well. Out of all of these emotions, anger can be the most confusing, hurtful and concerning for everyone.

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Reflect on the causes of anger listed in this section. Do any of them cause you to feel angry after brain injury? Consider discussing this with someone you trust.

External triggers of anger after brain injury

In many cases, the first step to managing anger is to identify what is triggering it. The following examples are some commonly reported triggers of anger after brain injury:

- People not understanding or underestimating the impact of brain injury – for example, others saying “I forget things all the time too!” to a brain injury survivor with memory problems.

- Consuming alcohol – this is generally discouraged after brain injury (for more information on this topic, see our publication *Alcohol use after brain injury*).

- Busy, distracting environments that make the survivor feel overwhelmed.

- Uncomfortable environmental factors such as temperature or noise.

- Situations that require waiting, such as being in a queue or stuck in traffic.

- Situations that make the survivor feel pressured or rushed.

Effects of brain injury as triggers of anger

When frustration or anger is caused by living with the effects of brain injury, it is important to find ways to cope with the effects. Below are just some examples of how common effects of brain injury can be triggers of anger.

- **Communication difficulties** – not being able to find the correct words or express oneself clearly can cause frustration, especially when others do not understand what the survivor is trying to express. Taking the wrong meaning from a conversation or misreading facial expressions can also lead to frustration.

- **Attention, concentration and information processing difficulties** – many brain injury survivors need longer to process what they see, hear or read due to difficulties with concentrating or processing information. Not being able to keep up with a conversation, activity or TV programme can be frustrating.

- **Memory problems** – a brain injury survivor might not be able to remember important information, such as key events in their life or appointments. Needing to be reminded of things by others, having 'gaps' in memory and being dependent on aids such as diaries or alarms can be frustrating.

- **Problem solving and decision making difficulties** - some brain injury survivors lose their ability to solve problems or make decisions. Even a seemingly simple problem can feel like a large challenge, which can be frustrating.

- **Personality change** - many brain injury survivors report feeling like a 'new person' after their injury. This can be difficult to accept and adjust to and can cause feelings of anger over the change in one's pre-injury self and life.

- **Loss of inhibition** - the brain injury survivor may lose their sense of inhibition and say things or behave in a way that is considered socially inappropriate. Others may react badly to the survivor's comments, which can in turn make the survivor angry.

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 brain injury survivors

The following tips might help brain injury survivors with managing their anger.

Change your approach to anger

- Try to become aware of the physical signs of your anger building up, such as rapid breathing, feeling hot and clenching fists. If you learn to recognise these changes in your body, you might be able to calm yourself down before the anger becomes an issue.

- Anger can be caused by stress and anxiety. Learning ways to manage these 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, or check out other tips in our publication *Anxiety after brain injury*.

- Learning to gradually accept the 'new you' by identifying your new strengths, interests and opportunities, can help to feel more positive after brain injury. More guidance on this is available in our publication *Post-traumatic growth after brain injury*.

Identify your triggers

- Being uncomfortable can cause frustration, for example feeling too hot or cold, or feeling overstimulated by bright lights or loud noises. If possible, try to modify your environment, or move somewhere else so that you are more comfortable.

- Try to have a regular sleep routine and plenty of good quality sleep. A brain injury can unfortunately cause some

people to have problems with sleep. More information on this and tips to help are available in our publication *Sleep problems after brain injury*.

- A brain injury survivor might be quicker to develop feelings of irritation or anger under the influence of alcohol. Try to cut down on drinking, or stop drinking alcohol altogether as this is generally discouraged after brain injury. More information on this is available in our publication *Alcohol after brain injury*.

- Try to keep your routine gently paced and spread activities out across the week or month to avoid becoming overwhelmed and stressed.

- Try to be well prepared for outings and have back-up arrangements made in advance to lessen the chances of getting frustrated if things don't go according to plan.

Talk to others

- Talk to others about how you feel when you get angry or after you have calmed down. Being open and honest can help you to process your emotions and find new ways to think about managing your anger, while also allowing others around you to be more aware of how you feel. If you are in public, consider explaining to others that you have had a brain injury and showing them your Headway Brain Injury Identity Card (for more information, visit www.headway.org.uk/idcard).

- Teach others about your brain injury and how it has affected you. Headway's publications can be a helpful starting point for these discussions.

- Discuss your triggers with family, friends and colleagues so that they are also aware of situations in which you may start to feel angry.

- Ask for help when you need it to lessen the chance of stressful situations coming up and causing you to get frustrated.

Get professional support

- If you feel like your anger is getting difficult to control, talk to your GP. They might be able to get you a referral to be seen by a suitable professional such as a neuropsychologist or a cognitive behavioural therapist.

- Counselling might be suitable if you need to talk to someone about how you are feeling, and any underlying issues that are causing the anger.

- 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 our nurse-led 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 (Monday - Friday, 9am-5pm) or helpline@headway.org.uk.

During an episode of anger

- Move away from a situation that is causing you to feel angry, for example leave the room or end 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 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 the bottom with irritation, and move up to higher intensities of annoyance, frustration, anger and fury. This can help to explain how you are feeling in the moment.

- Try to use calming techniques such as focusing on your breathing or practicing mindfulness. Search 'mindfulness' on our website for helpful resources at www.headway.org.uk.

- Express how you are feeling through art, music or writing.

- If possible, go for a walk or do some gentle exercises.

- Use your Headway Brain Injury Identity Card to let others know about your brain injury and its impact on your ability to manage your anger. For more information on our ID Card, visit www.headway.org.uk/idcard.

- 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, say sorry to them afterwards and explain how you felt. It might be difficult, but it can help to clear up misunderstandings and often makes both people feel better.

Tips for people around the survivor

Being around someone having an anger outburst or being on the receiving end of someone's anger can be very hard, even if you know that the anger is not directed at you. It can be particularly difficult to manage if the anger happens regularly or spontaneously, or if you are feeling upset or angry yourself.

Consider using the following tips.

- Try to identify what triggers the brain injury survivor's anger, for example certain environments or topics of conversation. Be prepared by having a strategy ready, such as encouraging the survivor to breathe deeply, changing the topic of conversation or suggesting they move away from the situation until they feel calmer.

- Discuss triggers that you have noticed with the survivor and encourage them to identify and discuss triggers themselves.

- Try not to get into arguments with the survivor if you disagree on something. Instead, make an effort to be calm and speak to them gently, even if you think they are wrong or they have misremembered information.

- Never trivialise the survivor's anger, even if it is over something that seems insignificant to you. Remember that sometimes simple things can remind survivors of how much their life has changed, which can be upsetting.

- Remove yourself from the area if the anger is being directed at you. Explain to the survivor that you are leaving because you think it will help them to calm down, rather than just walking away with no explanation.

- Try not to take anger outbursts personally and remember that it is a common effect of brain injury.

- Agree on a prompt or sign that you can use when you believe the survivor is 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 signs to show that they are starting to get angry.

- Remember that the Headway helpline is available to partners, 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.

Keeping safe

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.

If you are in immediate danger, or you are in an emergency, call 999.

Other services to contact include:

- If you are in England, Wales or Northern Ireland: your local neighbourhood policing team (visit www.police.uk or call 101)

- If you are in Scotland: Scotland's Domestic Abuse and Forced Marriage Helpline on 0800 027 1234.

National services that can advise include:

- Refuge's National Domestic Abuse Helpline: 0808 2000 247 or visit www.nationaldahelpline.org.uk.
- Headway's helpline for information and advice on supporting someone with managing anger after brain injury: 0808 800 2244 or helpline@headway.org.uk.

The print version of this publication received a Commended Award at the British Medical Association Patient Information Awards 2010.

We hope that this has been a helpful resource. Please consider sharing your feedback with us by scanning the QR code or by visiting our publication feedback survey https://uk.surveymonkey.com/r/hwpublications.

Learn more and support our work at www.headway.org.uk/get-involved.

This information was last reviewed in 2023.

We're here to listen.

If you need support, or have a question about brain injury, contact our free nurse-led helpline:

0808 800 2244
helpline@headway.org.uk

0115 924 0800 | enquiries@headway.org.uk
www.headway.org.uk

Head office: Bradbury House, 190 Bagnall Road,
Old Basford, Nottingham, NG6 8SF

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