Headway
the brain injury association

Returning to work after brain injury

This publication explains how a brain injury can affect the process of returning to work, common feelings about returning to work after brain injury, tips for making this process easier and suggestions for alternative options if you are unable to return to work after brain injury.

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Introduction

A brain injury can affect many of the skills that we rely on to work. While different jobs require different skill sets, some skills are common to many roles, such as being able to remember things, process information, concentrate and keep energy levels up. Unfortunately, a brain injury can affect many of these skills, among others. Returning to work can therefore be difficult for many people after brain injury, whether they are returning to their previous job or starting a new one.

This publication explains how a brain injury can affect the process of returning to work, common feelings about returning to work after brain injury, tips for making this process easier and suggestions for alternative options if you are unable to return to work after brain injury.

The information in this publication does not replace clinical guidance from medical professionals. You should always get advice from your GP or other suitably qualified

professional for help with managing the effects of brain injury.

How can a brain injury affect returning to work?

There are many possible effects of brain injury. These are usually grouped into physical, cognitive, sensory, emotional and behavioural effects. Any of these can cause difficulties with returning to work.

Below are some examples of how common effects of brain injury can affect a survivor's ability to return to work.

- Memory problems - affecting a survivor's ability to remember important meetings, or causing them to miss project deadlines
- Problems with concentration - causing difficulties when working in a busy environment with lots of noise and distractions around
- Executive dysfunction - causing difficulties with thinking through and following the steps needed to complete a project
- Fatigue - making it harder to concentrate on work, and risky to undertake manual work
- Headaches - causing discomfort and pain when looking at computer screens

... among many others. For more information on these effects of brain injury and many others, including tips for coping, visit our website at www.headway.org.uk.

Feelings about returning to work after brain injury

Brain injuries affect people differently. People will have different feelings about the impact of their injury, and different attitudes towards their ability to return to work. There is no right or wrong way to feel, and it is perfectly normal to feel several different emotions at once, for example feeling both anxious about working but also glad about returning to a sense of 'normality'.

Below are some examples of emotions people may feel about returning to work after brain injury.

- Many people report feeling **anxious or nervous** about the idea of returning to work, as they worry about how they will cope with the effects of their injury in the workplace.

- People may feel **frustrated** about needing to return to work to maintain a regular income, even though they know that it will be difficult for them.

- People may feel **confused** if they are not sure what their options are and what would be best for them, especially in the early days of their injury.

- Some people may feel **overwhelmed** by the idea of returning to work.

- Feeling like a **'different person'** after brain injury may make some people feel embarrassed about returning to work and being among their colleagues when they have changed so much.

- Others may be **excited** about the idea of returning to a job they enjoy, or people they enjoy working with.

- People may feel **glad** about returning to something that gives them a familiar feeling of ‘normality’ after the many changes that a brain injury can bring.

Things to consider before returning to work after brain injury

The following points are things to consider before you return to work after your brain injury...

Don’t return until you feel ready

Many people make the mistake of rushing back to work too soon after their brain injury, and then having great difficulty. Remember that the effects of brain injury can be long-term, so even after coming home from hospital or a rehabilitation unit, you may have effects such as fatigue, memory problems, headaches, depression or difficulties with processing information. These may improve naturally over time, or it might be that you gradually find ways of adjusting and coping. In any case, recovery from brain injury can take time, so you should not rush back to work before you have had a chance to adjust. Remember that you may be eligible for welfare benefits in the meantime.

Think about how much you want to tell your colleagues

If you have been away from work for a while, it is likely that your colleagues will know something about your absence, but they might not know that you have had a brain injury, or even what a brain injury is.

It’s up to you how much you choose to tell others, but remember that your colleagues will be able to support you better if they know about the support you need. For example, if

you have difficulties with prioritising, your colleagues might offer to help you with keeping notes and staying on track with deadlines.

Talk to your employer about any adjustments they can make

Under the Equality Act 2010, employers have a legal responsibility to make 'reasonable adjustments' to the workplace to support a disabled employee. Suggestions for these adjustments could include things like offering shorter working hours or providing equipment to help with staying organised.

Making sure it is safe to return to work

Make sure it is safe for you to return to work, for example by checking with your GP and making sure 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.

Practice a 'structured home programme'

This is a programme that you put in place while at home to help with practicing for a working week. It can involve things like waking up at the time you would need to wake up for work, practising tasks you would do at work, practising getting to and from work (such as catching a bus at certain times or driving down certain routes in working hours), or practicing activities that could help you to develop your memory, concentration or decision-making skills.

Talk to an occupational therapist

Occupational therapists (OTs) can advise on aspects of safely returning to work, so you might want to discuss this with them. If you are not currently supported by an OT, you could speak to your GP about the possibility of getting a referral to one, or search for an OT in private practice at www.rcotss-ip.org.uk/find.

Consider your route to work

If you need to travel to get to work, consider your route and how comfortably, safely and easily you can travel. If travelling is difficult, consider whether there are any colleagues you trust who could give you a lift, or public transport you can take. The UK government's Access to Work scheme (available in England, Scotland and Wales) can help with taxi fares if you have a disability and need help with getting to work but cannot use public transport. For more information, visit www.gov.uk/access-to-work/apply or contact the Access to Work helpline on:

- Telephone: 0800 121 7479
- Textphone: 0800 121 7579
- Relay UK (if you cannot hear or speak on the phone): 18001 then 0800 121 7479.

Access to Work is also available in Northern Ireland although it is a slightly different scheme - for more information, visit www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/access-work-practical-help-work.

Be kind to yourself

Returning to work can be difficult for many people after brain injury. If you try to return, but then find that it is not possible for you to continue, try to be kind to yourself, and honest about

what is best. Information in the section *Alternative options to returning to work after brain injury* might be helpful.

Tips for returning to work after brain injury

The tips in this section are ideas to consider when returning to work after brain injury. Remember that different things will work for different people, and will depend on personal circumstances and the nature of your work.

Consider a phased return

Many people find it easier to return to work on a 'phased return'. This means they start off with a few hours and gradually build this up to return to normal working hours. For example, someone who worked a 9am-5pm job before their brain injury may return to a 10am-3pm role. This change in working hours might help them to accommodate for needing more time to get ready in the mornings due to mobility problems, and needing to rest in the afternoons due to fatigue.

Discuss different roles or responsibilities

Talk to your employer about the possibility of taking on different responsibilities or roles that are more suitable for you, or reducing some of your workload so that you can gradually build this back up when you are ready. This will depend on your job's core requirements and the effects that you are personally experiencing.

Discuss how this information will be shared with colleagues in order to manage everyone's expectations.

Use helpful tools, adaptive equipment and strategies

Some effects of brain injury can be easier to cope with when using tools, adaptive equipment and coping strategies. Calendars, wall charts, notes, Dictaphones, alarms and diaries can help, although in some cases more specialised equipment might be required. The UK government's Access to Work scheme (available in England, Scotland and Wales) offers a grant that can help with the costs of specialist equipment. For more information, visit www.gov.uk/access-to-work/apply or contact the Access to Work helpline on:

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Take regular breaks

Depending on the nature of your job, you might be able to take regular breaks through the day, which can be especially helpful if you struggle with fatigue, overstimulation or anxiety. Talk to your employer about this so that they are aware of your needs and can make suitable arrangements, such as locating quiet rooms or areas that you can rest in when you need to.

Consider keeping a routine if this is helpful

Some people find that having a routine can help with settling back into work. This could be a morning routine when getting ready, or a particular set of weekly tasks that you follow to give your working week structure. Try to have back-up plans in place if things don't quite work to your routine to minimise stress.

Consider the suitability of your environment

Consider how suitable your working environment is. For instance, if you have mobility problems, are you located on a ground floor, or do you have easy access to emergency routes? If you have continence issues, are you close to a toilet that will be available for you if you need to use it in an emergency? If you feel overstimulated, is there a quiet room you can work in? Our environments are very important factors to how comfortable we feel at work, so think about what would be most helpful to you and discuss this with your employer.

Get support from family and friends

Family and friends might be able to help with practical things such as providing lifts to and from work, cooking meals, helping with childcare or just having somebody to talk to when you need it. Talk to someone who you trust if you need emotional support, such as 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. You can talk to our helpline if you need advice, support or a listening ear, on 0808 800 2244 or helpline@headway.org.uk. Our online communities can also offer a space for you to talk to others and ask questions; for more information, visit www.headway.org.uk/supporting-you/online-communities.

Get feedback from your employer and colleagues

This may seem daunting, but it can be very helpful to hear from others on how you are doing, especially as it might be difficult to accurately reflect on your own performance. 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.

Keep things in perspective

While it can be tempting to blame any new challenges on your brain injury, remember that sometimes problems can occur that are not because of your injury but are just a regular part of working life. Another thing to keep in perspective is that things can improve over time, so while you might be struggling with your brain injury now, things can and do get better for many people over time.

Don’t overlook the small things that can help at work

Getting enough sleep, good nutrition, hydration and maintaining exercise outside of work is important for your physical and mental wellbeing, especially when managing the stressors of returning to work after a brain injury.

Looking for new work after brain injury

Many people return to a previously held job after their brain injury. This can be easier in some ways as you will already be familiar with the role, your responsibilities, processes in place and colleagues. However, some people might decide that it is better for them to look for new work. If you are looking for new work, there are several things that can help you with finding something suitable.

Look for the ‘disability confident’ symbol

This is a symbol that some employers will share (i.e. on their websites, leaflets) that shows they are committed to employing disabled people.

Contact your local Jobcentre

They may have specialist advisors called Disability Employment Advisors or Work Coaches who can help with assessing your abilities and finding suitable work, depending on your circumstances.

Consider the Intensive Personalised Employment scheme

This scheme gives specialised support and training to people with a disability who are looking for work in England and Wales. More information is available at www.gov.uk/intensive-personalised-employment-support or by contacting your nearest Jobcentre.

Consider the Work and Health Programme

This is a scheme offered in England and Wales that gives personal support to help you to find and keep a job that suits your skills and circumstances. For more information, visit www.gov.uk/work-health-programme.

Talk to an occupational therapist

You might have already received some occupational therapy, or you may currently be supported by an occupational therapist (OT). OTs can advise on aspects of safely returning to work, so you might want to discuss this with them. If you are not currently supported by an OT, you could speak to your GP about possibly getting a referral to one, or search for an OT in private practice at www.rcotss-ip.org.uk/find.

Explore vocational rehabilitation (VR)

This is another scheme designed to specifically help people with redeveloping the skills they need for employment. You can

speak to your GP about accessing VR, or search for companies that offer VR through the Vocational Rehabilitation Association's website at www.vrassociationuk.com.

Other things to consider are finding a job that has suitable hours and somewhere close to home or home-based if travelling is difficult.

Alternative options to returning to work after brain injury

Some people are unable to return to work following their brain injury. This section suggests some alternative options to returning to work after brain injury. We advise you discuss these options with someone you trust before exploring them further.

- **Self-employment** is an option that offers greater flexibility and independence, however there is a lot to consider first and the level of responsibility may not suit everyone. The UK government has some helpful information on its website about this at www.gov.uk/working-for-yourself.

- You could consider **returning to education** and gaining new qualifications. Some people find that the process of having a brain injury makes them re-consider what they want to spend their life doing. Returning to education can be a good way to try something new, although it can be expensive, hard work and a big commitment, so this option should be explored carefully before committing to it. Course tutors may be able to offer helpful advice.

- Consider **volunteering**, which is an excellent way of staying connected to others, contributing to society and feeling fulfilled. Volunteering also offers greater flexibility, and you

can often choose the hours you commit. Choose a cause that you are passionate about so that you feel more motivated. You should also ask about any training you might need to take first. Headway shops, and groups and branches, often have volunteering opportunities you could consider - to find your nearest shop or group/ branch, visit www.headway.org.uk/donate/volunteer.

- You might be entitled to **welfare benefits** if you are unable to work due to a disability. Understanding your eligibility and the process of applying for benefits can be complicated, but you can find information on this on the UK government website at www.gov.uk/browse/benefits/disability .

Unfair treatment at work after brain injury

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, if this is appropriate and safe for you to do. You might also have a Human Resources (HR) department within your organisation that can help.

The organisation ACAS (the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) can also provide free, impartial advice about employment matters and disputes, as well as offering lots of information on their website at www.acas.org.uk. Their helpline number is 0300 123 1100.

For more guidance on this topic, see our publication *Making a complaint about treatment at work*.

Useful organisations

The organisations listed below are provided for information purposes only. Their inclusion does not imply

endorsement, recommendation, or approval by Headway. Users should make their own assessment of any organisation or service before engaging with them.

ACAS (the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service)
Helpline: 0300 123 1100
Web: www.acas.org.uk

Disability Jobsite
Web: www.disabilityjobsite.co.uk

National Careers Service
Tel: 0800 100 900
Web: www.nationalcareers.service.gov.uk

The Shaw Trust
Tel: 0300 30 33 111
Web: www.shawtrust.org.uk

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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

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