



Depression after brain injury

Headway's publications are freely available to download from the charity's website. Individuals and families directly affected by brain injury can receive free print copies of booklets via the helpline.

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

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to Dr Clíodhna Carroll, Clinical Neuropsychologist at St George's Hospital and Allied Neuro Therapy Ltd., and Dr Elizabeth Samuel, Clinical Psychologist 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.

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 after a brain injury. It is normal to have these emotions. While these feelings may improve over time, some people may experience ongoing feelings of sadness and depression that interfere with their ability to enjoy life or complete their regular activities.

Depression after brain injury can be caused by a number of things. It may be due to organic changes (damage to parts of the brain responsible for regulating emotions), or it may be due to the emotional reactions in dealing with the many changes that a brain injury can bring to a person's life.

This publication discusses these issues in more detail and offers some tips on how to cope with depression after brain injury.

If you need further information or emotional support, contact the Headway helpline on 0808 800 2244 or helpline@headway.org.uk. You can also contact your GP or Samaritans on 116 123. Other useful organisations are listed at the end of this publication.

What is depression?

Feeling sad is a normal reaction to a distressing event such as a brain injury. It may take time to recover from the injury and to adapt to the change in your circumstances. If you find you are struggling with your emotions, regularly feeling low, or if these feelings have been going on for a long time, this may be a sign that you are depressed.



Depression occurs when feelings of sadness and hopelessness persist over time and these feelings impact on your ability to engage in regular daily activities.

Depression can often occur together with anxiety.

There are a number of common symptoms of depression. These include physical and emotional symptoms, as well as changes in your thoughts and how you behave.

Physical	Loss of appetite or over-eating Poor sleep, sleeping too much or sleep being out of routine (e.g. sleeping during the day) Feeling exhausted/ no energy Headache or other pain Reduced sex drive
Emotional	Feeling sad, hopeless or miserable Feeling worried, regret or guilt Not being able to enjoy anything, even things which you know would typically make you feel happy Low self-esteem
Thoughts	Thoughts that you are not worthwhile Thoughts that everything is too much effort
Behaviour	Becoming withdrawn and isolated Losing interest in your appearance Losing interest in your work, hobbies or socialising Finding it hard to get started with things, even normal activities Finding it hard to concentrate and pay attention Using alcohol, tobacco or drugs more than usual

Thoughts of harming yourself and suicide

For some people, depression may lead to thoughts about harming themselves or suicide. These thoughts can be distressing and difficult to manage.

It can be helpful to have a plan for what to do when these thoughts occur (e.g., call a friend / family member, have a planned activity you enjoy, contact agencies that can support you). Help is available and you do not have to manage these thoughts and feelings alone. Even if you do not think that you will act on your thoughts, it is still helpful to speak with your GP or another medical professional about how you are feeling, so that support can be provided.

You can also text SHOUT to 85258, call the Samaritans or you can contact your local NHS urgent mental health helpline for help. The StayAlive App provides a resource with lots of useful information on how to stay safe in a crisis.



You can find your local mental health helpline number (England only) here: www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-urgent-mental-health-helpline.

The Headway helpline is also available to offer emotional support and advice on any aspect of life after brain injury including feelings of depression; we are available on 0808 800 2244 or helpline@headway.org.uk.

If you feel the need to self-harm or have already harmed yourself and need immediate assistance, call 999 or visit your local A&E department.

Identifying depression after brain injury

Along with considering the symptoms of depression outlined above, the NHS' 'mood checker' questionnaire can help you to identify whether you have symptoms of depression and anxiety. It is available here: www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/depression-anxiety-self-assessment-quiz/.

Some people experience physical disability or changes in their cognitive (thinking) skills after brain injury. The impact of these physical and cognitive changes can also influence feelings of depression after a brain injury.

Friends and family may also be able to identify signs of depression that you may not recognise for yourself (e.g., if your behaviour has changed).

You can discuss your feelings with your GP who can direct you to the appropriate support and treatment to meet your emotional needs. This may include a self-management plan, referral to professional services and / or medication.

Tips for managing depression after brain injury

The following tips are suggestions for coping with depression after brain injury. Some tips may be more helpful to you than others and you may need to try several things to find what works for you personally.

- **Talk to your family and friends about how you are feeling**

Letting your family and friends know how you are feeling can help you to feel less alone with your emotions and thoughts. It may also help your family and friends to understand why your mood or behaviour may be different after your brain injury. You may also be able to let others know how they can best support you. If you find it difficult to speak to others or are struggling to express yourself, try to find other ways of communicating such as sending a text message or a voice note.

If you are working or involved with social groups, it may also be helpful to make your employer / group members aware that you are feeling depressed and consider how the people around you can best support you.



- **Try to stay socially connected**

Depression can sometimes make it difficult to socialise with others as you want to be alone. It may be helpful to connect with others. If you are unable to attend large gatherings, ask a close friend to meet with you at a quiet location such as your house or a local park. You can also connect with other people through text messages, calls, social media, or online communities such as [Headway's HealthUnlocked community](#), which may feel more manageable than physically seeing people. You may wish to consider finding a local support or activity group where you can meet new people and try out new activities, such as your local Headway group or branch. More information on this is available at www.headway.org.uk/supporting-you/.

Headway's [guide for friends](#) offers information and tips to friends of brain injury survivors on how best to support them, so this may be a helpful resource to help others understand the effects of your injury.

- **Do activities that you enjoy**

Do what matters to you. Listening to music that you love, creating some art, reading a book, going outside (e.g., for a walk or to sit in the park), seeing a special person in your life can help. Depression can make it difficult to engage in activities but try to spend some time each day doing something you enjoy or consider trying something new.

Setting yourself small realistic actions to achieve in the next hour/hours/day can help. Start small and you can build up slowly to achieve the things that are important to you.

- **Learn about brain injury**

Knowing about your brain injury and how it affects you can help you to understand why things are difficult and may help to explain why you are feeling depressed or down. Knowing more about your particular injury can also help you to find ways to manage some of the changes you are experiencing. Having a greater sense of knowledge and control over your injury can lead to improvements in your mental health. Headway's publications are free to access and cover a wide range of information on the effects of brain injury. To browse through them, visit www.headway.org.uk/information-library.

- **Try to exercise for a few minutes every day**

Exercise is a proven method for improving low mood and may be an effective way for you to manage depression. If you have limited mobility, speak to a professional such as a physiotherapist or your GP about exercises that are suitable. Try to set yourself a routine so that you stay motivated to exercise every day, even if it is just for a few minutes.

- **Identify issues in your life causing or contributing to depression**

Try to identify any issues that may be causing or contributing to your depression



(e.g., worries about work, financial difficulties, family burden) and try to seek help for these from relevant professionals. You can contact Headway for guidance on where best to access support.

- **Consider putting together a ‘soothe box’**

A ‘soothe box’ is a physical box that contains personal items that can provide comfort when you feel upset. This box could include things like photos of people you care about or places you have visited, things you can touch and do things with (e.g., a colouring book, smelling perfumes, touching soft fabrics) or prompt cards with guidance on it (e.g., go for a walk, call a friend) or motivational statements. You can personalise this box to include the things which will comfort you.

- **Consider wellbeing techniques**

While there is limited research to show whether techniques like mindfulness, yoga and meditation are effective for managing depression after brain injury, some people find these techniques helpful. Speak to a suitably qualified therapist if you are considering trying any of these techniques out, as they may be able to guide you through learning how to effectively practice them. You can find more information about mindfulness on the NHS website at www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness/. There are a number of apps which can support you with practising mindfulness, meditation and compassionate approaches. See further details on these at the end of this factsheet.

- **Maintain a healthy lifestyle**

Maintaining a healthy diet, drinking plenty of water, avoiding alcohol and illicit drugs, and trying to ensure that you have a good night’s sleep can help with managing depression. Headway’s factsheet [Sleep problems after brain injury](#) gives guidance and tips on coping with sleep issues after brain injury which you may find helpful if this is something you struggle with. For more information on maintaining a healthy lifestyle, visit NHS Choice’s ‘Live Well’ website at www.nhs.uk/live-well.

- **Using technology**

There are a range of apps which provide support for managing depression. Always check details and reviews of an app before you download it and be aware of any privacy settings and costs involved. A list of helpful apps which are endorsed by the NHS is available at the end of this factsheet.

- **Seek support from other services**

Headway services such as the helpline or your local group or branch can offer emotional support if you are feeling depressed. There are also organisations that specifically offer support to people with their mental health, although these may not be experienced in supporting people with brain injury. A list of useful organisations is available at the end of this factsheet.



Professional support

There are a number of different professionals that can support someone who is depressed. However, it is best to get support from a professional that has experience of working with people with brain injury. This would be either a clinical neuropsychologist or a clinical or counselling psychologist who specialises in brain injury. You can get a referral to these professionals either through your GP or privately.

Counsellors may also be able to offer support through talking therapies and provide a space for you to talk about your feelings. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy has a therapist directory that you can use to search for private counsellors, available at www.bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists.

If you live in England, you can ask your GP to refer you or you can self-refer to a local psychological therapies service, called Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT). Your GP can help you with finding details of services available in your area, or you can find your local services using the NHS website: www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-a-psychological-therapies-service/. Within Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, you can ask your GP to refer you for mental health support.

Medication

Some people benefit from taking medication to help with managing depression, either alongside or instead of talking therapies. Your GP should be your first point of contact with whom to discuss trying or modifying your medication. It is very important that you never stop taking or reduce the dosage of your medication without guidance from a suitably qualified medical professional. If you are having problems with your medication, speak to your GP as soon as possible to request a review.

Conclusion

Depression is a common experience after brain injury, which can occur due to brain changes and / or due to the emotional reaction to a life-changing event. Depression after brain injury may also be related to physical and cognitive changes related to the injury. With the right support and information, many people can learn techniques to manage this depression.

Remember that recovery after brain injury can be a lifelong process, so while things may seem very difficult within the early stages after injury things can get easier. The effects of brain injury may naturally improve over time, or you may learn new ways of coping with the effects of brain injury to make life easier for you.

There are a number of things which you can do yourself to help with feelings of depression and there is professional support available. The organisations and resources listed in the following section can help you to cope with your feelings, along with the tips outlined



above.

For further information on coping with the effects of brain injury, or to find details of your nearest Headway group or branch, visit www.headway.org.uk.

Useful organisations

- **Action Mental Health** - for support in Northern Ireland
Web: www.amh.org.uk
- **Breathing Space** - for support in Scotland
Web: www.breathingspace.scot/
Tel: 0800 83 85 87
- **British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy's therapist directory**
Web: www.bacp.co.uk/search/Therapists
- **British Psychological Society's Specialist Register of Clinical Neuropsychologists**
Web: <https://portal.bps.org.uk/Psychologist-Search/Specialist-Register-of-Clinical-Neuropsychologists>
- **The C.A.L.L Mental Health Helpline - available in Wales**
Web: www.callhelpline.org.uk
Tel: 0800 132 737 or text 'help' to 81066
- **Meic - under 25 mental health helpline available in Wales**
Web: www.meiccymru.org/
Tel: 080880 23456 or text 84001
- **Mind - the mental health charity**
Web: www.mind.org.uk
Tel: 0300 123 3393
Email: info@mind.org.uk
- **National Suicide Prevention Helpline UK**
Web: www.spuk.org.uk/national-suicide-prevention-helpline-uk/
Tel: 0800 689 5652
- **NHS mental wellbeing audio apps**
Web: www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/mental-wellbeing-audio-guides/
- **NHS urgent mental health helpline - available in England only**
Web: www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-an-urgent-mental-health-helpline
- **PAPYRUS - Preventing of young suicide**
Web: www.papyrus-uk.org
Tel: 0800 068 4141



- **Samaritans**
Web: www.samaritans.org
Tel: 116 123
Email: jo@samaritans.org
- **Shout**
Web: <https://giveusashout.org/>
Text: 85258

Useful apps

ACT Companion

Catch it

Compassion

Cove (Music for your mental health)

Headspace

My Possible Self

Sleepio

Sleepfulness

Smiling Mind (Mindfulness – includes a sleep programme)

Stay Alive

Thrive

Factsheet first published 2017. Last reviewed 2022.

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