



Isolation after brain injury - top tips for coping

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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 is a life-changing event for almost all brain injury survivors and those around them. In addition to the various effects caused by the injury, many survivors feel that they are no longer able to socialise in the way that they did pre-injury.

There may be physical, emotional, or psychological effects that change the way in which a survivor is able to interact with others. Behavioural changes, such as behaving in socially inappropriate ways, may cause friends and family to drift away.

These issues can cause a survivor to feel isolated. Feelings of isolation may not be felt in the early days of injury while there is still a period of adjustment to life with a brain injury. However, as the full impact of the injury starts to become clear, feelings of isolation may be experienced.

This factsheet has been written for brain injury survivors to give tips on coping with and overcoming the challenges of isolation after brain injury. These tips have been suggested by brain injury survivors and experts on isolation after brain injury.

Remember that different things will work for and suit different people so try a few tips until you find a method that works best for you.

Top tips for coping with isolation

Communicate with others

- Friends, family and colleagues who have drifted away following your injury may have done so because they do not understand the complex nature of brain injury and why things are different for you now. Try to explain the impact of your injury, including how it makes you feel. You may find it helpful to refer to Headway's series of relationships factsheets that offer information and advice to relatives, friends, and colleagues of brain injury survivors. These are available at www.headway.org.uk/about-brain-injury/individuals/information-library/.



factsheet

- If you are not able to meet with friends and relatives the way you did before your injury, try to find new ways of doing this. For instance, you could find new places to meet that are more suitable for you, such as a coffee shop with a more relaxed environment instead of a busy café. Or if you are unable to leave home, consider inviting people over or using services such as Zoom or Skype to 'see' friends and family. Remember to stick to government guidelines when meeting others.
- Online communities can be a good way to talk to others with similar experiences. Headway's HealthUnlocked community allows you to connect with others affected by brain injury and talk in a safe, secure space. While not being face-to-face, interaction using online communities can still offer a level of social support and friendships can form based on shared experiences and interests. Remember to stay safe while you are online. Guidance on staying safe online is available from the National Cyber Security Centre's website at www.ncsc.gov.uk/collection/top-tips-for-staying-secure-online.
- Find out if there is a local Headway group or branch where you can meet others affected by brain injury by visiting www.headway.org.uk/supporting-you/in-your-area/ or by contacting the Headway helpline on 0808 800 2244 or helpline@headway.org.uk. Since the Coronavirus pandemic imposed a national lockdown, many groups have been meeting 'virtually', so you may still be able to 'attend' sessions and meet others; contact your local group or branch to ask about services they are running.
- Find a method of communication that works for you. If you are no longer comfortable with or able to talk on the telephone, why not send an email or write a letter to a friend instead? The advantage to these methods of communication is that you can take your time to form your thoughts and express yourself rather than needing to 'keep up' with a conversation, which can be cognitively demanding for some people after brain injury.
- If you are thinking of someone and missing them, reach out to them. It might be that they miss you too. A simple message on social media or a text to say you are thinking of them can be a nice way to reconnect with someone or start a conversation.

Find things to do

- If you are isolated at home, make a list of things you want to do and goals you want to reach to give your days structure and purpose. These do not need to be big activities or goals, do whatever works best for you. You could set



yourself a list of books or e-books you want to read/listen to, a new skill you would like to practice such as gardening, crafts or cooking, or an effect of your brain injury that you would like to try and improve by practising skills. Headway's *Redeveloping skills* booklet contains some useful information and suggestions for this, it is available at www.headway.org.uk/about-brain-injury/individuals/information-library/.

- If you are able to get outdoors, it can be helpful to go out at least once a day. Fresh air is good for mental health, and small day-to-day interactions such as talking to someone at a till in a shop or saying hello to people who pass by can help to feel less isolated.
- While sustaining a brain injury can affect many people's ability to work, you may wish to consider volunteering instead. There are many types of voluntary opportunities; you can choose one that suits your interests, passions or may help you to develop skills for future employment. Volunteering can allow you to meet people who share your interests and can be very rewarding and fulfilling. More guidance on this is available in our factsheet *Voluntary work after brain injury*.

Focus on the little things

- Life can sometimes be so busy and full of distractions that we often fail to appreciate the small things. However, doing this can bring a sense of relaxation and calm. Try to take time out to appreciate small things, especially in nature, such as watching the clouds in the sky.
- Remember that recovery after brain injury takes time, and any improvements, even if they are small, are worth celebrating. Being aware of your own recovery journey can help to keep a positive mindset and cope with any negative emotions that isolation may cause.
- Mindfulness is a technique that allows you to focus on how you are feeling in the present moment rather than being distracted by things around you or unhelpful thoughts. Research has found it to be an effective technique to help with several effects of brain injury such as fatigue.

Seek professional support

- If your isolation is causing you to experience negative emotions, such as depression or anxiety, talk to your GP about getting a referral for counselling or psychotherapy



- Sometimes the effects of brain injury such as inappropriate behaviour and anger issues can affect relationships and may cause friends and family to drift away. Professional support from a neuropsychologist or Cognitive Behavioural Therapist can help with addressing these effects. Talk to your GP about a referral if these are concerns.
- There may be well-being groups in your local area for instance groups that meet to practice mindfulness or meditation, and this may help with learning ways to cope with negative emotions as well as offering you a chance to meet others and practice these techniques in a group setting. You could also consider joining a faith-based group in your local area if you are religious or spiritual and gain comfort from this.
- Befriending services can connect you with a trained 'befriender' to offer social support and reduce isolation. Befrienders are often matched to you based on things such as your interests. You can find out more or find a befriender by visiting www.befriending.co.uk/about/find-a-befriender/.

Above all, remember that things can and do improve...

While brain injury can cause many difficult changes in your life, it is important to remember that things can improve over time and that you will gradually come to adjust to things. It can help to remember that even if you are feeling isolated now, things can improve over time and you may form friendships and good memories even in your 'new' life with brain injury.

We hope that the information in this factsheet offers some useful tips for coping with isolation after brain injury. For further information and support, visit Headway's website at www.headway.org.uk.

Headway's Action for Brain Injury Week campaign *A life of lockdown?* has a number of additional resources on the topic of isolation after brain injury that you may find useful and informative. Visit www.headway.org.uk/news-and-campaigns/campaigns/a-life-of-lockdown/ for more information.

Thank you to all of the brain injury survivors who contributed to this factsheet by sharing their experiences of isolation after brain injury.

Please tell us how helpful this publication has been by filling in our short survey at www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/hwpublications.