Headway
the brain injury association

Depression
after brain injury

This publication explains what depression is and how it can be caused by brain injury. It offers information on identifying depression and suggests tips for coping with this. It also explains how to get professional support for managing depression after brain injury.

www.headway.org.uk
0808 800 2244

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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.

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.

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/or 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, the NHS emotional and mental wellbeing questionnaire can help you to identify whether you have symptoms of depression and anxiety. It is available at www.checkwellbeing.leadershipacademy.nhs.uk.

Some people experience physical disability or changes in their cognitive 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 tips in this section 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. 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 trying something new. Setting yourself small realistic actions to achieve in the next hour/ hours/ days 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 and 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/about-brain-injury/individuals/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 interact 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 personally comfort you.

Consider using 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 publication.

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 publication 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 'Healthy Living' 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 publication.

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 publication.

Getting professional support for depression after brain injury

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-an-NHS-talking-therapies-service. Within Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, you can ask your GP to refer you for mental health support.

Medication for depression after brain injury

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 change 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.

Useful organisations/apps

The organisations and apps 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.

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: https://spuk.org.uk
Tel: 0800 587 0800

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: 0300 102 2470

Samaritans
Web: www.samaritans.org
Tel: 116 123
Email: jo@samaritans.org

Shout
Web: www.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

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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 2022.

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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