



**Headway  
Nottingham**

This information booklet is written for people with brain injuries, their families, carers and friends. We hope it will support understanding of brain injury as well as offer ideas to help manage difficult areas day to day.

## Top tips for: Managing Depression

This 'Top tips for Managing Depression' factsheet gives an overview of some of the difficulties you might face coping with depression following a brain injury. We are all different, and how you may feel won't be the same as other people, even if they have similar injuries to you. There are some practical tips and suggestions to help to make it easier for you to understand why you may be depressed and how to overcome some of the difficulties and find help.

### Introduction

There are times when all of us feel down, or feel things aren't quite right. Occasionally issues get on top of us and we may feel depressed. Usually we are able to sort things out by ourselves, or with support from family and friends. Occasionally we need outside help, perhaps from our GP or counselling. In general, most of us get through these times and begin to feel more optimistic.

It may be different for people, who have sustained a serious brain injury. Things you coped with easily before may be more difficult to understand and deal with. Emotions such as anger, fear, sadness and worry are all common in the immediate and early days following your injury. You may find that you gradually learn to adjust to the changes that your injury has brought about, however, it is possible that you could feel a deep sense of loss and sadness that troubles you for weeks, months or even years.

How profoundly these emotions affect your day-to-day living can be telling of whether you have depression.

This factsheet has been written for people with brain injuries like you, who are experiencing depression because of your injury. It describes what depression is, how to cope with it and where you can seek help. You will find a list of useful organisations can at the end of the factsheet.

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Registered Charity No. 1088685



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### What is depression?

Many people think that being depressed means feeling 'low' or sad. However, this is not strictly true, and it is very important to make a distinction between sadness and depression. Feeling sad is normal for all of us after a distressing event, or loss of something we once cherished. Coming to terms with your brain injury is obviously a very distressing time and you may be struggling with your sentiments and emotions. As we said earlier this is normal, however, finding yourself unable to cope with these feelings, or you feel you have been battling for a long time, may be a sign that you are depressed.

Other common symptoms of depression include a loss of interest in activities you once enjoyed, changes to your sleeping or eating patterns, feeling low in self-esteem and experiencing lots of negative thoughts. Occasionally, some people feel that their life is not worth living and they begin to develop suicidal feelings. We have a section later in the factsheet given more detailed help information and where to get help.

A lot of people with depression have reported that when they go to bed they hope things will be better in the morning and that they'll wake up feeling fine, sadly we know this isn't the case. Depression can be difficult to live with because it can impact on various aspects of your life and affect your family and friends. For instance, if you lose interest in socialising with people when you are depressed, may lead to you becoming socially isolated, and gradually lose the supporting network of friends and family.

Another example may be that you have problems with concentrating or motivating yourself at work. This could make your performance fall below the standards you would normally be happy with. In time this will become apparent to you colleagues at work that things are not right.

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### Depression after brain injury

Depression is very common after brain injury; research has shown that around 50% of people like you, experience depression during the first year of recovery. We mentioned in the previous paragraph that depression can affect your ability to feel motivated and have a negative impact on your ability to take part in rehabilitation activities, which could lead to a slower recovery.

Your brain is an incredibly complex organ and the physical trauma and damage caused by a brain injury may itself be the cause of your depression, as the areas of your brain that control your emotions may not be working as they were before your injury.

Depression can also develop as you begin to realise the impact your injury will have on your life as you try to come accept and adjust to the fact that things will be more difficult in the future.

### Diagnosing depression after brain injury

Because your brain is so complex it is not always easy to diagnose depression after your brain injury. Medical professionals often struggle to diagnose depression with people who have not had such a serious injury as you. Many of the symptoms of depression are similar to the effects of brain injury, such as fatigue or lack of motivation, making it harder to tell whether someone with a brain injury does in fact have depression. Having a constant feeling of being down, or lacking in energy, could be the first symptoms of depression.

Trying to diagnose yourself for any illness is not a good idea, particularly if you are feeling very down. What is a good idea, is talking to a close friend or family member about how you are feeling, they may have noticed some of the symptoms of depression we looked at earlier in this factsheet.



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If you are feeling anxious or panicky, the NHS has a 'mood checker' for you to try, perhaps with a close friend or family member. The checker can help you to begin to identify whether you have depression or not. To find out more go to:

[www.nhs.uk/Tools/Pages/Mood-self-assessment.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Tools/Pages/Mood-self-assessment.aspx)

If you are feeling depressed, there are a number of self-help tips that can assist with managing depression in the section Self-help tips for coping with depression. However, if depression is having a serious impact on your life, or if you are feeling suicidal, it is important to seek professional support. More information about this is available in the section Professional support.

## Practical strategies for coping with depression

If you are feeling depressed, there are a few things that can help you to cope on a day-to-day basis. A couple of useful points to remember are:

1. **Remind yourself that these feelings are normal.** Some people with depression may feel guilty about their negative thoughts. However, it is a completely natural response to feel grief, shock, fear and sadness following something as profound as brain injury. Remember that there is nothing 'weak' about being depressed, and try to take care that you do not fall into a self-critical thought pattern.
2. **There is help available.** We hope that the tips below can help you to manage your depression. However, don't be afraid to seek help from family, close friends, colleagues or supportive organisations such as Headway Nottingham. There are also professionals that can help in various ways. More information on this is available in the section Professional support.



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### Tips to help you cope with depression

The following tips might help you with coping with depression. These are just suggestions, you will find that while some of them are useful, others might not suit you as well.

#### **Talk to your family or friends about how you are feeling.**

This is important to ensure that they don't misinterpret your moods as being disinterested. If it's too difficult to speak to them about how you feel, or if you are struggling to express yourself, try to find other ways of communicating such as writing a letter, e-mail or even a text message. This can allow you to take your time with finding words to describe your thoughts.

#### **Speak to your employer**

If you feel that your performance at work is suffering, it is important that you speak to your manager or HR department. They may not be aware of the difficulties you may be facing. Once they are aware of the problems they can offer effective help to make your working environment easier. Feeling good at work is a critical step towards your recovery.

#### **Try not to become socially isolated**

It is all too simple if you are feeling depressed to shut yourself off as it may seem like the easy thing to do. An important part of your recovery is to spend at least some time socialising with people on a face-to-face basis. If you feel you are unable to attend large gatherings, ask a friend to meet with you at a quiet location, such as at your house or a local park. Alternatively, consider finding a local support or activity group that you can attend to meet new people and try out new activities.



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### **Engage in activities that you enjoy doing**

The old saying of 'a little of what you fancy does you good', is great advice if you are struggling with depression. Listening to music, reading a book, or even drawing a picture; in fact, anything that helps if you feel better while you are doing it. A lot of research has shown that any activity you enjoy doing, that takes your mind off things, is a good way of coping with depression. If you feel like it, why not have a go at something you haven't tried before.

### **Educate yourself on the effects of brain injury**

Understanding your brain injury is one of the first steps you must take towards accepting and managing depression. Headway Nottingham's series of 'Coping with ...' strategies, and lots of other publications, offer information on the effects of brain injury, as well as offering tips on managing the effects. For more information, visit:

<https://www.headwaynottingham.org.uk>

### **Exercise for a few minutes every day**

All of us, regardless of how we feel, benefit from regular daily exercise. You might find it difficult to motivate yourself, particularly if you feel depressed, fatigued or have trouble getting about. However, we all know that exercise is a well proven method to make ourselves feel better. A ten-minute walk to pick up a newspaper in the morning, and five or ten minutes of gentle stretching in the afternoon is a good way to start. Even better, why not set yourself a simple daily routine, perhaps building up as each week progresses.

There are lots of alternatives you can consider, depending on how fit and strong you are to start with. Wherever we live there are sports clubs and gyms run both privately and by your local authority. If you think it will help, get a close friend, family member or neighbour to come with you. Some useful tips on exercising for depression can be found on the NHS website, here: [www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/Exercise-for-depression.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/Exercise-for-depression.aspx)

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### Seek support from other services

There are depression-specific support groups, where people can get peer support from others who are also affected by depression, although these tend to be non-brain injury specific. Depression support organisations are listed in the section Useful organisations.

### Identify issues in your life that may be causing depression

We all know there can be any number of reasons why we can feel depressed and getting to the causes is not easy. For example, there may be serious things on your mind like money worries, relationship problems, coming to terms with your brain injury, or lots of other issues. Headway Nottingham have produced a number of 'Coping with ....' strategies they may help you, your family and friends understand some of these issues. These can be found at: [www.nottinghamheadway.org.uk](http://www.nottinghamheadway.org.uk)

### Put together a 'soothe box'

This is a box that contains personal items that may make you feel better and make you feel more able to cope when you are feeling depressed. For more information and ideas of what to include in a soothe box, visit [www.getselfhelp.co.uk/emergency.htm](http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/emergency.htm)

### Wellbeing techniques

What we mean here, are simple exercises and techniques such as mindfulness, yoga, meditation or other relaxation techniques which can help you feel a little better. It is not scientifically proven or well researched, however, many brain injury sufferers like you have reported benefits from taking part in them. If you would like to try some of these techniques or speak to a therapist who will be able to guide you through the beginners' classes.

### Healthy lifestyle.

One of the best tools you have in fighting depression is to maintain a healthy lifestyle. This involves a balanced and healthy diet, drinking plenty of water, avoiding alcohol and



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trying to ensure that you have a good night's sleep. You can find lots of tips and advice on the NHS Choices 'Live well' website:

<https://www.nhs.uk/livewell/Pages/Livewellhub.aspx>

## Professional support

There are a number of professionals who can support someone, like you, who may be depressed because of your brain injury. It is best to seek support from professionals who specialise in brain injuries, such as Clinical Neuropsychologists or Clinical Psychologists. These professionals are expert in the assessment and intervention of behavioural, emotional and cognitive problems caused by brain injury. In addition, you may find counselling can also be very helpful in coping with, and recovering from depression. Counsellors help by encouraging you to talk about your feelings. They can also assist with exploring what causes negative feelings and how best to manage them.

You can access these professionals through a GP referral or privately. Headway Nottingham could also help with finding details of private therapists in your area, although we cannot recommend any specific service. In some instances, you may be able to refer yourself to a local psychological therapy service. Your GP can help you with finding details of services available in your area. Additional information is available from the NHS: [www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/low-mood-stressanxiety.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/low-mood-stressanxiety.aspx)





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### Medication

It may be that your GP or medical professional has decided to prescribe medication to benefit you with depression. This can be either alongside, or in place of other therapies. Antidepressants work by targeting different types of chemicals in the brain or altering chemical activity in different ways. The two most commonly prescribed types of antidepressants are selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and serotonin-noradrenalin reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs)

**Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors** are one of the most commonly prescribed types of antidepressants. They work by increasing levels of serotonin. SSRIs are commonly prescribed because they have fewer side effects than other antidepressants.

**Serotonin-noradrenalin reuptake inhibitors** are similar to SSRIs. They alter the activity of serotonin and also affect another chemical called noradrenalin.

Nearly all antidepressants have side effects, which can be difficult to cope with, especially if they worsen other effects of your brain injury, such as fatigue. Some of the most common side effects are:

Dry mouth	Nausea or being sick
Low sex drive	Headache
Constipation	Anxiety or nervousness
Visual problems	Tiredness
Changes in eating patterns	Visual problems

Antidepressant side effects can subside over the course of taking the medication. You should speak with your GP if you feel that the side effects are not getting better, or if they are having a very negative



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impact on your life. You should also speak to your GP if you feel that your antidepressants are not working. However, this may be normal as your medication may not start taking effect until after a number of weeks. It is very important that you **do not** stop taking or reduce the dosage of your medication without instruction from a medical professional. If you are having problems with your medication, speak to your GP as soon as possible.

## Suicidal thoughts

We know that some people's depression can be severe enough to make them feel suicidal. This is characterised by extremely negative thoughts about themselves or the future, and may often lead them to think about, or attempting to end their own life.

**If you are feeling suicidal, remember: you do not have to go through your suicidal feelings alone - help is available.**

If you are experiencing occasional thoughts of suicide, talk to a family member or close friend that you trust, or speak to Samaritans on their 24-hour support line on 116 123 or e-mail [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org). The team at Samaritans are trained to support people who are feeling suicidal. They will treat your contact with confidence and will not judge you.

You can also ring Headway Nottingham to talk about how you are feeling or get guidance on what to do to manage your suicidal thoughts. The contact details for Headway Nottingham are at the bottom of every page in this factsheet.

You should also consider telling your GP or other professional (such as your Clinical Neuropsychologist, Clinical Psychologist or counsellor) if you are feeling suicidal. Even if you do not think that you will act on your suicidal thoughts, it is important for them to understand how you are feeling.

If you feel that your problems are getting out of control, make an urgent appointment with your GP, or contact NHS 111 to explain how you're feeling. If you think that you are about to commit suicide, go to your nearest Accident and Emergency (A&E) department or ring 999 if you do not think you can get to your nearest A&E.

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Although the greatest visible recovery after brain injury occurs in the first six months of injury, and many people continue to recover many months or even years afterwards. You may be feeling that you cannot face the future now, but this should get better over time; especially with support from family, close friends and professionals. Remember, all of those who care for you, want you to be around for a long time, there is absolutely no shame in asking for help.

## Conclusion

Depression is a very common experience after brain injury. However, with the right support and information, you can expect, over time, to improve and learn to manage your depression on a day-to-day basis. It is very important that you seek support for depression early on, for instance from a Clinical Neuropsychologist, Clinical Psychologist or a counsellor. Close friends and family can also be key sources of support.

We hope that this information has helped you to learn that your life after your brain injury will be different. Headway Nottingham are there to help and support you through these challenges.

To help you overcome some of the other difficulties you may be facing after your brain injury, Headway Nottingham have produced a series of 'Strategies for Coping' factsheets.

1. Coping with Balance Problems
2. Coping with Communication
3. Coping with Memory
4. Coping with Depression
5. Coping with Difficulties Making Decisions
6. Coping with Executive Dysfunction
7. Coping with Lack of Insight
8. Coping with Fatigue
9. Coping with Mood Management

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### Useful organisations

The following organisations provide support to people experiencing depression:

**Depression UK**

Web: <http://www.depressionuk.org>

Email: [info@depressionuk.org](mailto:info@depressionuk.org)

**Samaritans**

Web: <http://www.samaritans.org>

Tel: 116 123

Email: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

**Mind - the mental health charity**

Web: <http://www.mind.org.uk>

Tel: 0300 123 3393

Email: [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)

**Rethink Mental Illness**

Web: <http://www.rethink.org>

Tel: 0121 522 7007

Email: [info@rethink.org](mailto:info@rethink.org)

**Sane**

Web: <http://www.sane.org.uk>

Tel: 0300 304 7000

Email: [info@sane.org.uk](mailto:info@sane.org.uk)

Please bear in mind that these organisations provide help mostly for people who haven't suffered a brain injury. They are a good place to start, especially if feel that you are struggling to cope. If you would like brain injury specific help, you could contact a professional with experience in brain injury. You can search for counsellors in your area using the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy's search tool: <http://www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk/therapists>

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