

Supporting a person with a brain injury

This document has been designed for vocational consultants and planners who are working with people who have sustained a brain injury and want to return to work.

What is a brain injury?

A brain injury refers to any damage to the brain that is acquired through an accident or trauma (such as a car accident or assault) or illness (such as a stroke or brain tumour). A brain injury may be referred to as an acquired brain injury or a traumatic brain injury.

What are the effects of a brain injury?

The effects of brain injury are different for each person, depending on how severe the injury was, and which parts of the brain were affected. The brain controls everything in our body: our thinking, memory, movement, strength, coordination, speech, vision, mood and behaviour. An injury to the brain can affect all or just some of these functions.

The brain can recover over time, with most of the recovery occurring in the first two years. Recovery depends on many factors, such as how the brain was injured, the severity of the injury and the person's access to rehabilitation and support. Not everyone recovers at the same rate or to the same degree.

Some effects of brain injury will be obvious, such as walking with a limp, inability to use one arm or poor vision. Others may not be visible, such as memory problems, mental fatigue, difficulties concentrating, planning or multitasking. Sometimes people experience changes to their personality. These may be subtle, like being more talkative, or more noticeable, like difficulty controlling emotions or interacting with other people.

Some people with a brain injury may not be aware of the changes from their injury. It would be worthwhile talking with other people (family, rehabilitation clinicians, and case managers) about whether the person's work goals are suitable and safe.

Impact of brain injury on returning to work

Returning to work is a common goal for many people with brain injury. It is part of their rehabilitation, like returning to their other life activities and responsibilities. Returning to work can occur at the same time as returning to other daily activities.

Some people may have difficulty adjusting to the expectations of the workplace. How well a person manages at work depends on the demands of their job. One job may require physical strength, coordination, and balance, whereas another job may have more demands for cognitive skills like planning, problem-solving, and communication.

There is no 'best time' for a person to return to work after a brain injury. It is best to be guided by the person and their medical and rehabilitation team about their readiness to return to work. Once back at work, the pace and duration of the return-to-work program will vary for each person.

Service providers who support a person's return to work

The local **Brain Injury Rehabilitation Program (BIRP)** team has specialised clinicians with experience supporting people with brain injury. They can provide advice about how the person's brain injury may impact their return to work and how to best manage it through workplace adjustments.

A **vocational rehabilitation** provider assists the person and their employer in navigating the return-to-work process and coordinates the program. Vocational provider involvement is dependent on the person's funding.

The BIRP team works with the vocational provider to manage the person's employment program.

Services to assist a person in returning to work

- A workplace assessment considers the physical and cognitive job demands to determine how the person's brain injury may impact their ability to work in their usual role. It is completed by a vocational rehabilitation provider. The assessment also identifies suitable duties the person can complete if they cannot perform all their usual duties.
- A return-to-work plan includes the proposed duties, work hours, and supports that the person needs to resume work. This plan is developed between the employer, employee, and vocational provider. Input from the treating brain injury rehabilitation team is often included. There may be more than one return-to-work plan, gradually stepping up the duties and hours towards the return-to-work goal.
- Workplace adjustments. The term 'workplace adjustments' refers to any administrative, environmental, or procedural changes that will help a worker manage their work duties. Adjustments will vary from person to person. But some typical adjustments in the 'return to work plan' may include:
 - o Start on reduced hours and gradually increase.
 - o Work on non-consecutive days, and gradually build to consecutive days
 - o Allocate tasks that are most familiar to the person
 - o Schedule more demanding tasks in the morning
 - o Schedule regular rest breaks to reduce fatigue.
 - o Use a diary, checklists, 'to-do' lists and written notes to help memory
 - o Provide clear instructions for tasks and the work routine
 - o Limit distractions in the workplace which may mean working in a quieter or different work area.
 - o Initially avoid time-pressured work
 - o Initially supervise work tasks to assist with readjusting to the work routine
- A vocational assessment identifies suitable employment options if the person cannot return to their previous role. It considers their employment history, work potential, training and education, interests, work habits, and personality. At the same time, it considers the person's physical, psychological, and cognitive abilities.
- Vocational counselling assists a person in adjusting to changing their work goal after their brain injury. It can prepare them for transitioning from one workplace, and/or work role, to another more

suitable workplace, and/or work role. Vocational counselling can help to identify new employment pathways that align with the person's strengths, values, and interests.

Additional resources

More information about brain injury can be found at the following websites:

The ACI brain injury rehabilitation network includes videos of client stories of their return to work.

[ACI Brain Injury Rehabilitation Network](#)

[Synapse](#)

[Brain Injury Australia](#)