

TIPS AND TRICKS

Supporting young people after brain injury

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Do you provide support for someone who has suffered a brain injury? Maybe one of your family members, friends, boyfriend or girlfriend has suffered a brain injury.

Living with a brain injury is sometimes known as living with a 'hidden disability' because people can't see it. It is understandable if the person you are supporting is feeling scared, confused and frustrated; they have probably been thrown into a world they know little about, but are expected to quickly understand and cope with.

This leaflet aims to answer some of the questions you may have around how to best support young people who have suffered a brain injury.

This guide will cover:

Health Remembering

Fighting Getting organised Getting help

Dealing with emotions

Focusing Education and work

Relationships Alcohol and drugs

Money What a brain injury doesn't mean

What a brain injury doesn't mean

It is not always easy to understand what having a brain injury is like. Here are some important facts:

- Just because the person looks fine, it does not mean that they are fine. Brain injury is a 'hidden disability' because you can't see it. This does not mean that the problems a person is having are not real
- A 'mild' brain injury does not mean that a person has 'mild' problems. A 'mild' head injury can still mean a person may find it difficult to manage their problems. A person who has had more than one 'mild' brain injury can have similar problems to those who have had one 'severe' head injury
- It does not mean that the person is stupid. People with a brain injury can still be very clever, but you may have to repeat things or speak more clearly than usual
- Having a brain injury does not mean that the person is lazy, but a brain injury may make them feel tired easily. It can be harder for people to get started. These things may make it look like they are lazy when they are not
- A brain injury can still have happened even if the person does not remember it happening. A person may not realise the effect that a blow to the head has had on them, or even that they have had one. It is normal for someone to forget what has happened straight after their brain injury
- Having a brain injury does not mean that the person is rude. It may be true that their personality has changed; perhaps they are a lot more aggressive than before. You may feel like you don't know who they are any more. They may not realise this but there are ways you can help

Dealing with emotions

You may have noticed changes in the way the person acts, which can be upsetting. People with a brain injury may have exaggerated emotions a lot of the time.

- Anger. Things that used to be simple are now difficult for them. They are experiencing huge life changes which can, and will, lead to anger
- They may cry easily or feel very sad. On days like these, they may not have any energy or drive to do anything
- Mood swings. They may be calm and happy one minute, then frustrated or sad the next. They may even forget they were angry a few minutes ago and carry on as if nothing has happened. This can be irritating for you but try to keep calm

People with a brain injury may experience none of these changes, all of these changes, or have some good and some bad days.

Be aware that people with a brain injury may not realise how they come across to other people.

What to do

- Anger and frustration can be hard to manage but there are things you can do to help. Try to help them spot what makes them angry. If possible, try to distract or remove the person from the situation that is making them angry
- If you see them getting angry, encourage them to breathe deeply and slowly. Other things that they find relaxing can also help, such as listening to music. Try to get them engaged in doing something they enjoy
- Trying to help them when they feel tired and unmotivated can be difficult but getting out and about and being active can make them feel better about themselves. Even a small amount of exercise is a good idea
- It can be helpful for both of you to talk to each other. Ask them how they are feeling and you can help them understand how they come across

For professionals

If you notice they are consistently appearing low in mood or their emotions are getting in the way of their goals in life, consider referring to their GP or mental health service for an assessment.

Remembering

They may become forgetful. You might hear them say things such as:

“I don’t always know what day it is”

“I forgot to do my homework”

You may talk to them about an occasion when you were together and they may not remember it at all.

- Being around someone that forgets things can be frustrating for you, especially if these things seem ‘easy’ to you. Forgetting things can make people feel frustrated, angry or scared
- It is common for them to remember events in the past but not new things
- Having memory problems can be tiring. People need to make an extra effort to remember. As they get tired, they may then find it even harder to remember. This can be irritating for them and for you

What to do

- Although it can be difficult for you, try to be understanding and patient
- If they cannot remember an occasion try not to show surprise or comment on their lack of memory, just describe the occasion as clearly as you can. This may help them to remember at least some of it but, if not, just move on
- Sometimes photographs can help the person to remember
- Help them set alarms on their phone or computer as reminders. Help them write down what they need to remember on a calendar or in a book or diary. Using simple aids can help the individual improve their memory, feel more independent and positive
- If they can’t remember something this may lead them to panic. It can make a big difference if you can stay calm as it will help them relax and help them remember

For professionals

If you are concerned that their memory is having a significant impact on their functioning, consider referring them to their GP.

Getting organised

It may be really hard for them to think about what they are going to do this afternoon let alone tomorrow. Thinking ahead and planning is something that most people with a brain injury struggle with.

Does the person come across as lazy because they don't do much? It may just be that they find it difficult to plan what they want to do and find it hard to get motivated and actually do it.

What to do

- Routines are helpful. You can help them remember what they need to do each day. Help them write down a plan. It might be difficult for them to stick to a routine but it can make a really big difference
- Be there for them to talk to. It is important for them to speak to others about what they find difficult

Focusing

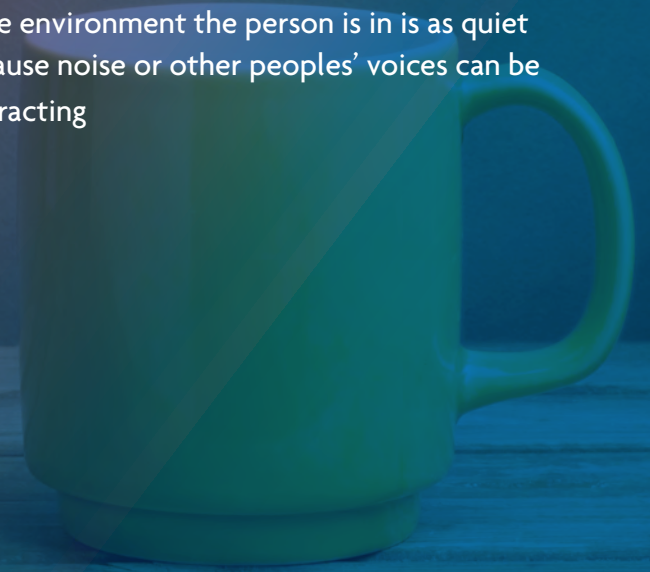
Do you get irritated because the person doesn't listen properly?

Here are some other problems they might have:

- Difficulty focusing on more than one thing at a time. Maybe they have to stop what they are doing if someone starts talking to them. This can be irritating for them and you
- Getting easily distracted. They may find it hard to focus on one thing for a long time, such as watching a whole TV programme

What to do

- Sleep is important as it can be harder to concentrate when you are tired. Encourage the person to do difficult things when they feel most awake such as in the morning or early afternoon
- Break large activities down into small, easy tasks over short time periods
- As a person with a brain injury may get distracted easily, they may need to take breaks and need more time to get something done. You might find it difficult to be patient, but breaks can be helpful for them
- Try to ensure the environment the person is in is as quiet as possible, because noise or other peoples' voices can be particularly distracting



Relationships

A person with a brain injury may seem rude because they avoid speaking to people. This could be because they find it difficult to keep up with a conversation or get distracted when someone is talking to them.

- They may know exactly what they want to say but have difficulty finding the right words to say it. They may also have trouble putting words in the right order
- The person may get confused about when it is their turn to talk in a conversation
- They may not think before they say things, which might mean that they swear more or say the wrong thing. They may also seem rude because they forget to think before they speak. This may mean that they end up upsetting people or, even worse, get into fights
- The person may find it harder to read or write

What to do

- Speak to them gently about their behaviour. Make them more aware of what they are doing as they may not realise
- Try your best to keep calm and not get angry
- Be prepared to repeat what you said to them or write things down so that they can remember what you said. This can get tiring for you but it can make a difference

Fighting

Because people with a brain injury tend to get angry more easily, and because they are often more impulsive, they may get into arguments or fights.

- They may do this without meaning to
- They may want to fight and argue more

What to do

- Make sure that the person understands what you are saying to avoid misunderstandings that can lead to arguments or fights
- Slow down when you speak to the person, so that they have time to take the information in
- Try to talk to the person first to figure out why they are angry and see if there is a way to help them get what they want
- Encourage them to take deep breaths and give them some space if you can

For professionals

- Ask them to make a list of social situations they find difficult. Work together to plan how they can better manage these situations. Offer to role-play these situations with them so they are able to try out new skills in a safe environment
- Offer time to talk about how they are feeling. If they wish to make changes in their social circle, encourage them to make an action plan of how they are going to achieve this
- If they feel isolated, encourage the use of local community resources, for example: peer support, social groups and befriending schemes

Education and work

Having a brain injury can make education or work very difficult for a young person.

Being at school or work can be hard anyway, but with a brain injury, things can be even more difficult. A person with a brain injury may feel like they are different from everyone else. It can be annoying or upsetting for them if they can't keep up with what their friends are doing, and this may leave them feeling lonely.

Here are some problems that they might be having:

- Feeling tired a lot
- Finding it difficult to concentrate
- Getting angry easily if they find something difficult
- Finding it hard to do their homework and give it in on time
- Feeling lonely at school or college as they don't feel that close to their friends anymore

You may think that they are just being lazy or not listening but all the problems described here are normal for someone with a brain injury. Try not to worry as there are things that you can do to help.

What to do

- Be there for them to talk to, and encourage them to talk to their teacher or supervisor about the things that they are finding difficult
- Encourage them not to be afraid, and to speak up and ask questions if they are confused about something
- Help them set reminders on their phone, computer or diary to help them remember when they have an exam coming up or when their homework is due. It might take a while for them to get used to reminders but it can make a big difference
- Encourage them to meet up with friends outside of school or work and to do things with them, such as playing sports

Alcohol and drugs

Alcohol and street drugs have serious effects. This can be hard for the person to accept when they just want to go out and forget their problems. Drinking alcohol is even more dangerous if someone has a brain injury. It is like drinking two pints of beer or cider when the person actually only drank one.

- Alcohol and drugs can make the person's problems worse. For example, alcohol can make their memory worse
- Although drinking alcohol might make someone feel happy for a little while, it can make them feel very low later, and even lower if they carry on drinking
- Seizures (fits) - If a person drinks alcohol or takes street drugs after their brain injury they are more likely to have a seizure even if they have never had one before

What to do

The best advice would be for them not to drink alcohol at all but we know this isn't easy.

- Some people do say that giving up alcohol completely is actually easier than trying to cut down on how much you drink
- Street drugs are illegal so it is important that they are not taken
- Help the person to make contact or keep appointments with a substance misuse support worker (Community Drug and Alcohol Team)

Money

For a young adult with a brain injury, money can be confusing and difficult to manage. It may be hard for them to admit this.

Problems include:

- Not being able to plan ahead, like saving up for something they want
- Buying things they don't need without thinking about it properly
- Spending all the money they get in one go without saving any

What to do

- Help them write a list so they know exactly what they need to buy. There are lots of apps they can get on smart phones that help to write lists
- Encourage them to use reminders (on a calendar, phone or diary) and help them set important dates, such as when they need to pay a bill
- Help them write down when they have bought something so they can keep track of their spending. Getting into a habit of doing this can be difficult, but anything they do to keep track of their spending is a step in the right direction. It might help if you go shopping with them

Health

It is important that you understand what the person with a brain injury is going through. This can make it easier to understand why they are finding something difficult. A brain injury may mean that they:

- Get headaches or feel dizzy
- Get tired really easily
- Have problems with moving their body, or find it hard to balance

What to do

- Sleep is really important if they get headaches or feel tired easily. Encourage them to rest when they seem tired
- Getting into a good routine like going to sleep and waking up around the same time each day can be helpful
- Going to the gym and keeping active will help them maintain a healthy lifestyle and stick to a routine

Getting help

Making a change to anything you and the person do can be slow and hard. Getting support can help you and the young person take control of their life.

If you need further help or advice:

www.thedtgroup.org/foundation

The Disabilities Trust Foundation

www.birt.co.uk

The Brain Injury Rehabilitation Trust

www.nhs.uk

Learn about the symptoms of brain injury on the NHS website.
For more help ring NHS 111

www.dwp.gov.uk

The Department of Work and Pensions can offer help on jobs and money

www.headway.org.uk

Headway

What you can do

- Relax. Being around someone with a brain injury can make you feel stressed. Give yourself time to relax as well as getting them to relax too. We all need a bit of 'me' time
- Talk. We all find this hard but it is really helpful when you talk to each other about your worries. Make sure that you talk to friends or family - you need support too
- Plans and routine. Giving them a hand to set alarms will help them remember what they need to do. Getting into a routine can also help them remember what they need to do every day
- Comparing the person to how they used to be is not helpful. Avoiding comparisons can be hard, but making them will only get you down



The Disabilities Trust Foundation

The Disabilities Trust is a leading national charity, providing innovative services, rehabilitation and support solutions for people with profound physical impairments, acquired brain injury and learning disabilities as well as children and adults with autism. The Foundation is the division within the Trust that aims to make a difference to the lives of those who are unable to access our core services. The Foundation enables the Trust to share its expertise and knowledge through research and the piloting of new ideas. Our project work is designed to initiate and enhance good practice and direct or influence policy within our areas of expertise - brain injury, learning disabilities, autism and physical disabilities.

Founded in 1979, The Disabilities Trust is a company limited by guarantee incorporated in England and Wales under 2334589 and registered as a charity in England and Wales under 800797 (BIRT: 800797-1) and in Scotland under SC038972 (BIRT: SC043579). Registered office as shown.

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