

Supplementary Information : Acquired Brain Injury (ABI)



An Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) is an injury caused to the brain since birth. There are many possible ways this could happen that could include a head injury (a traumatic brain injury), a brain tumour or a stroke.

For information on a comprehensive range of Acquired Brain Injuries visit Headway: <https://www.headway.org.uk/about-brain-injury/individuals/types-of-brain-injury/>

Behavioural Effects of ABI -

Behavioural changes after an ABI can be wide ranging. These can include: (sourced from Headway)

Disinhibition :

A common change early in recovery is disinhibition, that is, loss of control over behaviour, resulting in socially inappropriate behaviour. This ranges from a tendency to divulge personal information too freely, to disturbing and unpredictable outbursts of uncontrolled rage.

Common complaints include a tendency to make tactless remarks, to laugh inappropriately, and to be over-familiar towards others. A major area of difficulty, especially early in recovery, is that of sexual behaviour - making inappropriate sexual advances or remarks. Abusive or crude language may cause offence and be acutely embarrassing for relatives or in social situations. Most people gradually regain control over their behaviour, but those with a severe injury may remain impulsive and/ or inappropriate in their actions.

A few people never regain adequate control over their behaviour, remaining unpredictable, aggressive and reliant on others to exercise a degree of control over their behaviour.

Impulsiveness :

A person with a brain injury may tend to speak or act without thinking about the possible consequences of their behaviour. This can lead to embarrassment in social situations, such as if they say an inappropriate remark without thinking that it might upset the person they are speaking to. Or in other circumstances it can lead to practical difficulties, such as if they agree to do a task that they are not realistically able to complete, or if they spend more money than can be afforded.

Obsessive Behaviour :

A person may become obsessive or fixated on certain thoughts or behaviours after a brain injury. For instance, they may be afraid that their possessions will be stolen and subsequently check their belongings repeatedly, or they may insist on a particular routine or things being done in a certain way.

Irritability and Aggression :

Perhaps the most common behavioural change after brain injury is that of increased irritability. People with a brain injury are often impatient, intolerant of others' mistakes, and easily irritated by interruptions, such as noise from children or machinery, which disrupt their concentration. They are frequently reported to be short tempered, for example when things do not work out as expected or where there are differences of opinion with family or work colleagues. Where this is associated with poor behavioural control, it may result in outbursts of verbal or physical aggression.

Dr Gemma Elliot, Clinical Neuropsychologist and Trustee of Headway Lincolnshire

"Anger is one of the many emotions which can be expressed differently, or be less controlled following a brain injury. Many factors may underlie the changes including (but not limited to) damage to the frontal lobes and limbic system, and overstimulation. It is also important to consider the impact of factors such as social circumstances, previous personality, and the balance between current demands and resources.

"Developing an understanding of what is going on for each individual is essential in order to direct the type of support and intervention required. Whilst hints and tips can certainly be useful, there is no one strategy which will work for everyone. Neuropsychologists may be in a position to assess and advise.

"As well as being distressing and confusing for the person themselves, altered emotions can have a significant impact on those close to them. Support should therefore be directed towards both the individual and their family. Sometimes developing the understanding of others (and altering their responding) can be the key to moving forwards."

Apathy and Loss of Initiative

Some people may become passive, unresponsive and lacking in initiative after brain injury. They may appear unconcerned and even unaware of their difficulties, especially in the early stages of recovery. Others may appear interested and have good intentions to carry out activities, but are unable to organise themselves and initiate action. This may happen to any of us when feeling depressed, but for the person with a brain injury, this can result directly from the injury itself rather than solely as a result of depression.

Egocentricity

People may also become egocentric after brain injury, tending to be self-centered and appearing not to consider the feelings or needs of their family and friends. In adversity, it is most common for anyone to tend to focus on their own needs, but this can be greatly exaggerated for a person with a brain injury. Cognitive impairments can mean that they are oblivious to, or unable to appreciate, others' points of view, and they may be unaware of the needs of others.

Headway offer 10 tips to help individuals to control their own anger:

- Learn to appreciate just how powerful your thoughts are. They are automatic and can cause you to become angry for no apparent reason.
- It is only your interpretation of a situation that makes you angry. You may be right, but always think about other interpretations first.
- Write down how you feel when you are angry. You can show this to someone you trust later and get another point of view.
- Practice noticing how tense your body feels when you are angry, then relax and feel the difference. You will then be able to measure how angry you are, when compared to how you feel when relaxed.
- Try to notice the warning signs of your anger, such as shoulders rising up, breathing faster, clenching fists etc. Remove yourself from situations when you feel those warning signs.
- Practise relaxation and breathing exercises to calm down.
- Distract yourself by doing something you like, for example listening to music.

- Remember, everything becomes more difficult when you are angry. Remind yourself that you deserve to keep yourself calm in order to make good decisions or put your point across.
- When you feel yourself getting angry, think of someone who normally calms you down. What might they say to you if they were there? Or think of a special calming place, piece of music or picture. Try to make this part of a routine that you can use regularly to help you cope.
- Record when these ideas have helped. This will make it more likely that you will use them again when you have angry feelings in the future.

And 9 tips for family, friends and carers :

- You may feel you already know what 'triggers' their anger. However, rather than tell them what to do or what to avoid, help them discover it for themselves.
- Design some experiments (or do some tests) with them, and ask them to rate their anger on a scale of 1 - 10 when they are close to possible triggers, e.g. loud noise.
- When you both discover a trigger, help them find another way to look at the situation. Suggest to them that rather than saying:
 - "Why have you got that TV on so loud, you are so selfish", it's better to try: "Please could you turn it down a bit, the noise bothers me."
- Agree on a prompt or sign that you can use when you believe that they are getting angry. For example, you could blow over your shoulder, indicating "blow away your anger", to prompt them that they need to calm down.
- Busy places can be difficult for someone with a brain injury, as it can be difficult to process all the information. If you see them getting angry in such a situation, encourage them to move away to somewhere quieter.
- If the person is getting angry try to direct their attention away from the cause.
- You may not always know what is making them angry. You will need patience to work out what triggers the anger. Even simple things like watching people chatting freely can bring up feelings of sadness and injustice.
- Recommend that your friend or relative looks through the Headway fact sheet 'Managing Anger After Brain Injury'. You could work through the factsheet with them and help them to use the suggested strategies.
- Think about strategies to help yourself. If they have had a bad day, and they dump their anger on to you, you can think of your own coping statements such as:
 - "That felt very hurtful, but I know you didn't mean it that way".
 - "What's this about? You must be feeling in a bad state to be that rude to me".

Suggested Further Reading

Explore the excellent Headway website here - <https://www.headway.org.uk/>

The Royal Hospital for Neuro-disability has an informative website - <https://www.rhn.org.uk/>

The Children's Trust has a very good website full of useful information - <https://www.thechildrenstrust.org.uk/brain-injury-information>

Brain Injury e-Learning Resource - Behavioural Difficulties.

<https://www.acquiredbraininjury-education.scot.nhs.uk/impact-of-abi/behavioural-difficulties/>