

# BEHAVIOUR AFTER ACQUIRED BRAIN INJURY

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## AND HOW TO HELP

# INTRODUCTION

Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) is the term to describe an injury to the brain that you were not born with. ABI and recovery are experienced differently by everyone. The team at P.A.U.L For Brain Recovery wants to support you during this difficult time and help you understand how an ABI may affect your life and how to manage the changes that occur. This booklet will specifically focus on changes to a person's behavioural functioning skills.

After reading this booklet, we hope to give you a better understanding of the behavioural changes that may occur after sustaining an ABI, and how best to manage them with the support of health professionals, P.A.U.L For Brain Recovery and the wider community. The booklet provides guidance for those experiencing executive functioning difficulties, but can also be used to inform friends or family members of those affected by ABI.

**YOU**  
are not

**ALONE**

# The Impact of Acquired Brain Injury on Behaviour

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# How and why can brain injury change my behaviour?

Everyone is unique, and all brain injuries are unique, so brain injury can impact people differently. Our brain is the organiser of our body, thoughts and feelings, and as such can make up elements of who we are, down to details of what we like and dislike, our sense of humour, or our way of approaching life. When we have an injury to our brain it can change us. This may be because of physical injury to certain parts of our brain affecting how information is sent/received, or because elements of our life (such as how we spend time, or where we live) have changed, which can affect how we feel. These possible changes can depend on what type of brain injury you have experienced, or the environment around you.

## ***THERE ARE MANY FACTORS THAT AFFECT US AND OUR BEHAVIOURS:***

### **Physical environment**

In our physical environment (the space we are physically in) things such as the layout, noise level or temperature of a room may affect how we physically feel and therefore how we act, as well as things such as the time of day. For instance, a social gathering may make the room more noisy and hot, which can make our brains more easily tired, so we can appear more confused.

### **Psychological environment**

In our psychological environment, things such as our understanding of a situation, our usual habits, internal thoughts, feelings, beliefs, expectations and emotional needs affect how we act. For instance, if we are feeling lonely, we may cry or call out for help more; if we are used to having freedom to go outside and this has now become more restricted, we may feel trapped and be more irritable. Brain injury can change many elements of our life, including our psychological environment.

# How and why can brain injury change my behaviour?

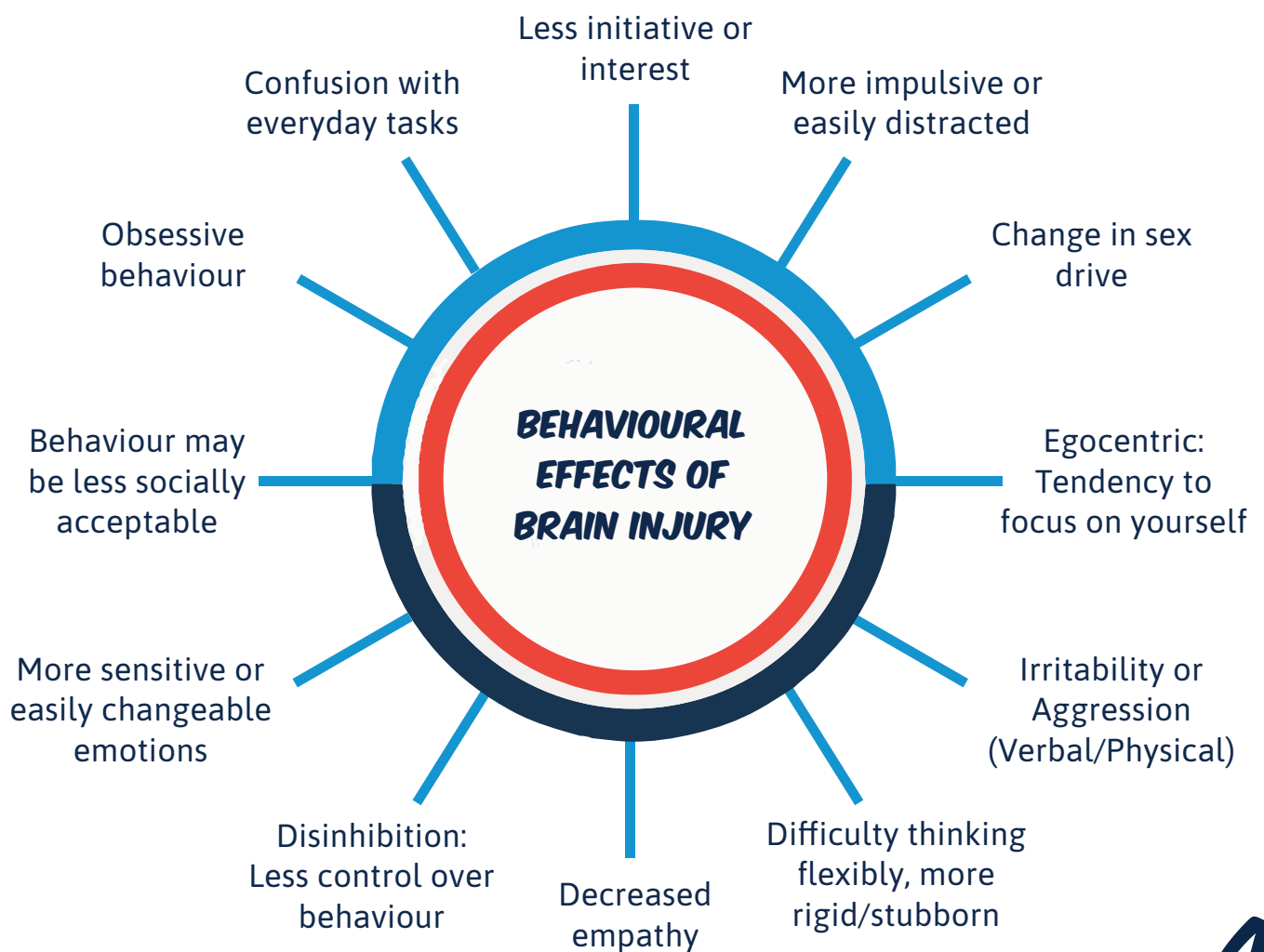
## **BIOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENT**

There can be changes in our biological environment after brain injury, such as changes in how we process our senses, medication side-effects, or poor health at times, which can impact how we act.

## **SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT**

Our social environment can also impact our behaviour, more so after brain injury. These are elements such as access to social support and events, maintaining relationships with people that matter to you, trips out or visits to keep life varied.

## **EXAMPLES OF BEHAVIOURAL CHANGES AFTER BRAIN INJURY**



## Some of the key changes commonly noticed are detailed more here:

### **LESS INITIATIVE OR INTEREST**

- It may be that you struggle to process and engage in activities now due to physical changes, or mood changes that make it hard to feel positive about activities.
- You may become passive or apathetic, appearing not to care about yourself or others as much as you used to.
- You may not participate in activities you previously enjoyed, or need prompts from others to feel motivated or get started.

### **TENDENCY TO BE SELF-FOCUSED**

- Brain injury can make it difficult to be as aware of, or understand, another person's perspective.
- You may appear not to consider the feelings of others and be concerned only about yourself.
- You may be unaware you are doing this and unaware of what others are feeling.
- This may be very different to how you were before and could affect your relationships with others.

### **IRRITABILITY OR AGGRESSION**

- Our emotions can be more sensitive and reactive after brain injury.
- You may become less patient or tolerant of things that cause stress or more easily frustrated or angry.
- It is valuable to remove yourself from the situation. You could try relaxation exercises or writing down how you feel to help you notice your triggers for these difficult emotions. You can then action a soothing response.

### **DIFFICULTY THINKING FLEXIBLY**

- Brain injury can make previously simple tasks more complex, making it harder to problem-solve or adapt to a situation that has changed.
- You may notice feeling or appearing more rigid or stubborn in your thinking, or finding it hard to change how you approach something challenging.
- Others may be able to help identify alternative methods to complete a task, or encourage 'thinking space' to think more creatively/flexibly.

### **LESS CONTROL OVER BEHAVIOUR**

- You may struggle to self-monitor your actions, saying or doing things you wouldn't before; this is often referred to as 'disinhibition'.
- You may also notice more impulsive or spontaneous behaviour.
- Examples include: divulging personal information more freely, making inappropriate sexual comments or swearing more.
- This is related to how our brains process social norms, and may also be related to decreased empathy.

### **OBSESSIVE BEHAVIOUR**

- A person may become more obsessed or fixated with higher anxiety levels. Resorting to recurrent thoughts or behaviours can be a way of seeking safety and certainty at times of distress.
- You may feel you need, or take comfort in, certain routines or structure, and may become frustrated or upset if this changes.
- Brain injury can also cause difficulties with understanding when we have completed tasks, with repetition appearing like obsession.



# Ways to help you manage your own behavioural changes

As this booklet has highlighted, if you have experienced a brain injury then various changes in behaviour may occur. It may be hard for you to notice these changes and it may seem that things are happening which are confusing or difficult to understand. Here are some ideas to help you manage through this time:

**REMEMBER: THE EFFECTS MENTIONED IN THIS LEAFLET ARE NOT YOUR FAULT**, but by using strategies it may become easier to manage the natural behavioural changes after brain injury.

**IT MAY BE USEFUL TO WRITE DOWN WHEN SOMETHING DIFFICULT HAPPENS** or a moment when you responded differently to how you might before your injury. Try noticing any events that may have triggered or led up to it, what happened in the moment, and any consequences. This may help you to develop an awareness of changes, possible warning signs and patterns, and reflect on what has happened; helping you learn and adapt for the future.

**BE AWARE OF THE IMPACT OF THE ENVIRONMENT** and try making helpful changes, such as reducing noise, or changing your social contact. This is useful for managing the amount of demands placed on your brain, allowing it to rest and process information more effectively.

**TALK TO PEOPLE YOU TRUST ABOUT HOW YOU ARE FEELING** and how best they can support you. This is also important as it can help your friends/families to better understand. You can also access further support from healthcare professionals and organisations such as P.A.U.L For Brain Recovery.

# Ways to help you manage your own behavioural changes

When experiencing life after brain injury, it is also very important to regularly rest. You may not be able to manage the same level of activity that you could before, and you may need to pace yourself. This also refers to 'mental activity', such as thinking or reading, not just physical energy such as walking or tidying. Rest is best when it reduces the number of senses you need to use, such as sitting in a dark room with little stimulation for example no TV or music.

Look after your mental health, as well as your physical health. As highlighted in this leaflet, your brain injury may have a direct impact on your behaviours by changing how your brain sends and receives information, but equally important is the indirect effect that brain injury can have on your emotional wellbeing and mental health. If we are not feeling emotionally well, this affects our brain's balance and functioning, and it can be easy to find ourselves not behaving as we normally would or would like to, such as being more irritable, or disengaging with activities that usually bring us joy. Try different self-care strategies such as relaxation, listening to music, physical exercise or imagining a calming image or place when your emotions feel overwhelming.



# Practical strategies for helping behavioural changes

## **DIARY**

Keep a diary of triggers, difficult days and strategies that you have learnt to support your behavioural changes.



## **MINDFULNESS**

Attempt mindfulness or relaxation activities using apps such as Headspace or Calm or YouTube videos to see if any work for you.



## **ROUTINE**

Try to create a routine, which reduces triggers for difficult situations.



# Relaxed Breathing

Make sure you are in a comfortable position, whether that's sitting or lying down. You can also close your eyes if you feel comfortable. Try to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth.

Breathe in to a count of 4, pause for a moment, and breathe out to a count of 4.

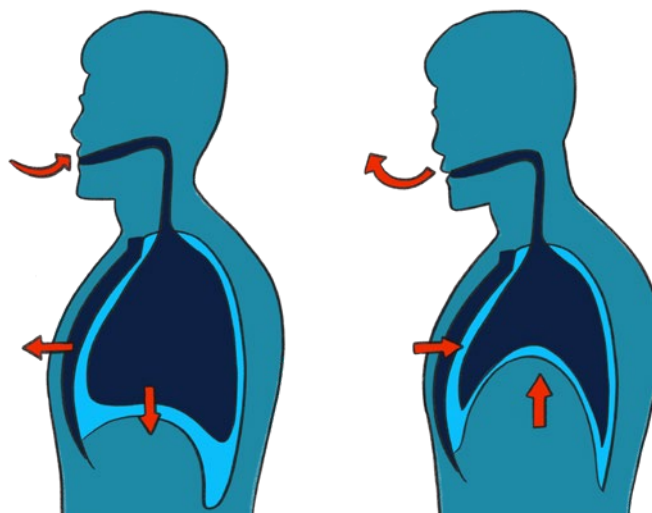
**BREATHE IN....2...3...4....HOLD... 1...OUT...2...3....4.....**

If possible, focus your breathing lower down in your belly and not high up in your chest. Check this by putting your hand on your stomach and seeing if it moves when you breathe in.

**KEEP YOUR BREATHS SLOW, SMOOTH, STEADY AND CONTINUOUS.**

Try breathing in this way for a few minutes at a time – it may take some time for the balance to be restored. If you can, aim for 5-10 minutes of relaxed breathing.

**REMEMBER TO PRACTICE!** Although it may seem easy, relaxed breathing may take some time to get the hang of. Try to practice three times a day if possible.



# STOPP Technique

This is a technique that allows us to gain some distance between distressing thoughts and feelings, reduce the physical reaction of emotion/adrenaline at times of high stress, and find some calm to help us think more logically and rationally.

**S**TOP!

Just pause for a moment. Say it to yourself, in your head, as soon as you notice your mind and/or your body is reacting to a trigger or stress.

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**T**AKE A BREATH

Notice your breathing as you breathe in and out. Slowly breathe in through the nose, out through the mouth.

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**O**BERVE

We can notice the thoughts going through our mind, we can notice what we feel in our body, and we can notice the urge to react in impulsively.

- What thoughts are going through your mind right now?
- What are you reacting to?
- What sensations do you notice in your body?

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**P**ULL BACK – PUT IN SOME PERSPECTIVE

DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU THINK!  
Thoughts are thoughts, NOT facts.

- What's the bigger picture?
- What is another way of looking at this situation?
- What advice would I give a friend?
- **THIS WILL PASS**

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**P**RACTISE WHAT WORKS – PROCEED

- What is the best thing to do right now?
- What is the most helpful thing for me, for others, for the situation?
- What can I do that fits with my values?
- Where can I focus my attention right now?
- Do what will be effective and appropriate.

# Strategies to help with anger

## Notice your warning signs/trigger signs:

In which situations do you feel anger most often?

Can you notice any physical changes such as your shoulders tensing or your heart racing?

What is your interpretation of the situation?



## Walk away from the situation:

Firstly, try to find a distraction from the situation that's making you angry.

Think of something that calms you.

This will likely be difficult but it is important to reduce the risk of physical or verbal aggression.



## Write down information about what happened:

Write down what happened in the situation, what triggered the feelings of anger, what was your interpretation, what did the other person/people think?

Write down what helped and what didn't help for you in this situation.



# Strategies to help with anger

## Consider the alternatives:

Consider the different interpretations of the situation.

How would you like to react to the situation when you feel calmer?



## Use relaxation exercises:

Find out what type of relaxation exercise fits for you.

This could be muscle relaxation, breathing exercises, physical exercise or imagery of a calming place.



## How friends and family can help

This section offers some suggestions as to how friends and family members may be able to help a loved one experiencing behavioural changes after a brain injury:

**OFTEN THE MOST HELPFUL THING FOR A PERSON IS JUST KNOWING THAT THEY HAVE PEOPLE AVAILABLE TO LISTEN AND UNDERSTAND**, to rely on in this difficult time of change, to get some sense of consistency and safety. This communication can help you learn what life is like from the perspective of the person with the brain injury.

**SUPPORT YOUR LOVED ONE TO UNDERSTAND THESE CHANGES** and notice their triggers for overwhelming emotions or moments when they had acted differently, and support them to come up with strategies to manage this.

**WORK OUT WITH YOUR LOVED ONE HOW THEY WOULD LIKE TO BE SUPPORTED** and try to implement this day to day, for example: how would your loved one like you to react if they say or do something inappropriate? Having a clear, agreed plan can help in times of distress.

**RECOGNISE THAT ANY CHANGES IN YOUR LOVED ONE AFFECTS YOU TOO.** It can affect your relationship and place some additional stressors on your own emotional wellbeing, so look after yourself too.

**IT IS HELPFUL TO GIVE REASSURANCE AND SHOW AFFECTION** or connection to your friend or family member with the brain injury. This can help them to feel more connected with their life and values, feel more stable, and remind them that they are not fundamentally a different person.

Recovery from brain injury is a continued process and experience which will last months and years. Behavioural changes can be very challenging emotionally. It is important to maintain positivity and recognise your needs and wishes, which will continue to adapt throughout this time. P.A.U.L For Brain Recovery has further literature on related topics (such as changes in emotions and identity following brain injury). You can also talk to the team personally, or you may find it helpful to seek referrals to specific healthcare services.



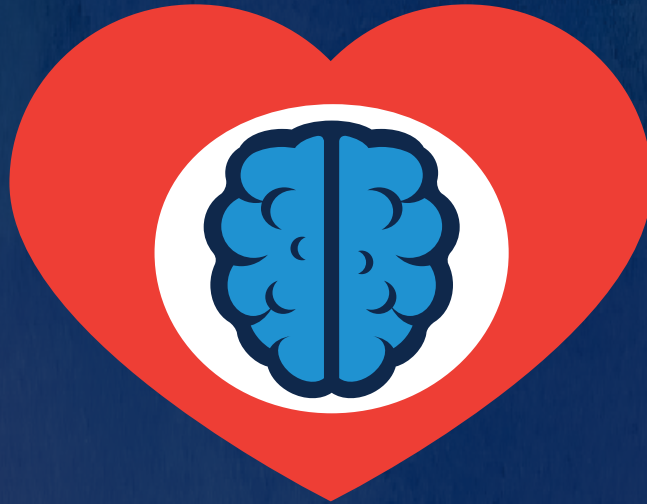
**FOCUS ON:**

*how far you've come*

**NOT**

*how far you have to go*

Please get in touch if the charity can help you further with your recovery journey



**P.A.U.L**<sup>TM</sup>  
For Brain Recovery

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POSITIVITY      AWARENESS      UNDERSTANDING      LOVE