

Depression and Brain Injury

Depression and changes in mood are common after a brain injury. Depression may be caused from the direct effect of the injury on the brain, or it may result from the changes, and stress that the injury has had on the person's life. For example, the person may no longer be able to return to work or driving, their relationships may have changed, they may not be able to think (remember, concentrate) like they used to, or their personality may no longer be the same as what it was like before the injury. It is normal to experience feelings of grief and loss about the things that have changed since the injury. However, if these feelings persist and get in the way of the person living their life, they may be experiencing depression.

What are the symptoms of depression?

Some of the symptoms of depression include:

- Feelings of low mood and sadness, helplessness, worthlessness and guilt
- Less interest or pleasure in things or activities previously enjoyed
- Withdrawing from friends and family
- Tiredness or loss of energy
- Loss of sexual interest
- Changes in sleep
- Changes in eating patterns
- Changes in weight
- Physical aches and pains
- Poor concentration
- Irritability
- Thoughts of death and suicide

All people experience periods of sadness or some symptoms of depression during their life. Usually these only last for a short time. When someone has a number of emotional and physical symptoms that last for several weeks and effects social, home or work life then the person may be suffering from depression.



Depression after a brain injury

There can be an overlap in the symptoms of depression and brain injury. For example, symptoms such as trouble concentrating, irritability, tiredness and difficulty controlling emotions, are commonly seen after a brain injury and do not mean that the person is depressed. This can make it difficult to determine whether the symptoms are a result of the brain injury or may actually be depression. Due to the difficulty diagnosing depression after a brain injury it is important to speak with your GP or a mental health professional who understands brain injury.

If the person has experienced depression before the brain injury, this may make them more vulnerable to depression after an injury.

How can depression impact on recovery?

Symptoms of depression such as tiredness or loss of energy may mean that the person has trouble engaging with other people or participating in rehabilitation activities. Brain injury may affect ability to cope with feelings of depression. The person may have trouble reasoning or coming up with less negative or unhelpful thoughts. Poor impulse control and reasoning resulting from brain injury may place the person at risk for acting on unhelpful thoughts and engaging in harmful behaviour.

Living with depression

- Like other illnesses, depression can be treated. Treatment may involve taking medication or participating in psychological (talk) therapy. Psychological therapy can provide strategies for managing symptoms of depression and stress and prevent depression from returning. Your GP can refer you to a local psychologist.

Whether the symptoms are a result of depression or brain injury, the following strategies will be helpful in improving mood:

- It is important to participate regularly in activities that provide a sense of challenge or achievement, as well as participating in activities that are enjoyable. Not only do these have a positive impact on mood and well-being, but inactivity and withdrawal from social events can contribute to low mood and thinking abilities. A good way to overcome this is to schedule in regular weekly social and recreation activities using a calendar or planner. This could include going out for coffee or a meal with friends or family or becoming involved in hobbies, groups or organisations.
- Keeping physically active is important as exercise has been shown to lead to improvements in mood.
- Try to maintain regular sleep patterns, eat well and avoid alcohol and drugs as these factors can impact on mood.

Crisis support can be obtained from Lifeline's 24 hour counselling service by phoning 13 11 14 or by dialling 000 if life is in danger. Beyondblue info line can provide information and referrals to relevant services and can be contacted by phone on 1300 22 4636 or by email on info-line@beyondblue.org.au. For further information on depression, see the Beyondblue website-<http://www.beyondblue.org.au/>