

3. Mental health

Behaviour

Behaviour and personality changes for people ageing with traumatic brain injury

It is common to have changes in your behaviour and personality after a brain injury. These changes can take many different forms and make it hard for you to be independent and maintain relationships. As you age your behaviours can keep changing and you may also find it hard to stay independent, which could lead to feeling frustrated or upset. It may also be difficult for you to see your behaviour changing or that there is a problem. Your family and friends may be the first to notice and ask you to get help from a health professional.

Common changes in behaviour and personality after traumatic brain injury

- Finding it hard to control your emotions – leading to sudden or extreme changes in mood
- Feeling frustrated, annoyed, or irritable more quickly
- Getting angry more easily
- Finding it hard to understand social situations
- Feeling unmotivated – having trouble starting things or going places
- Becoming inflexible – getting stuck on only one way to do things
- Becoming impulsive – saying or doing things without thinking them through

Identifying and managing behaviours that cause problems?

The A-B-C framework (Antecedent-Behaviour-Consequences) is one method that could be used with the support of your family, friends, carers or health professionals. To learn how to use the A-B-C framework please see page 55.

Where to get help

A neuropsychologist or clinical psychologist can help with education, behaviour training, and skill development.

A GP or the NDIS can give you a referral to one of these health professionals for behaviour support.



Anxiety

Why anxiety can be a problem for people ageing with traumatic brain injury

After a brain injury you may find some situations harder to deal with. You might not be able to take part in activities you used to like, feel unsure about the future, or lose self-confidence. If you were more anxious before your injury you are also more likely to develop an anxiety disorder after your injury. As you age, anxiety may also become more common. This could be because of things like increasing frailty, worrying about falling, changes in your social life, or losing confidence or independence. Many people will develop anxiety at some point after their injury as you go through a period of adjustment just after your injury and may continue to experience changes as you age.¹⁶

How do I know if I have a problem with anxiety?

Anxiety is often a response to stressful things in our lives. Mild levels of anxiety are normal and often helpful as they help us to focus and alert us to possible dangers. However, anxiety disorders can develop when people have trouble managing their fears and these feelings become extreme and all-overwhelming. Signs of this may include:

- Feeling worried, stressed, or irritable most of the time
- Experiencing changes in appetite
- Having trouble sleeping
- Having difficulty concentrating
- Finding it hard to be in crowds or to socialise with others
- Worrying about making mistakes or failing
- Experiencing physical symptoms such as:
 - Chest pain
 - Breathlessness
 - Sweating
 - Shaking
 - Feeling dizzy
 - Nausea

We normally experience most of these symptoms at times throughout our lives. If these symptoms get to be too much and start make it hard for you to get on with your everyday activities or stop you from enjoying things you would usually enjoy, then it is time to get help.

What to do if you are feeling anxious

- Try mindfulness or meditation (see 'Apps' on *page 58* for some suggestions)
- Find a quiet space where you can lay or sit down and take some deep breaths
- Remember that this feeling won't last forever, and it will pass
- Don't try to push the thoughts away – they can come back
- Go for a walk or do an activity you enjoy

How to prevent or manage anxiety

- Talk to a health professional – you don't have to manage this alone
- Take your medication as prescribed
- Plan weekly physical activity (see *page 26* for a guide on physical activity)
- Eat a balanced diet (see *page 25* for a guide on nutrition)
- Manage stress
- Meditation and breathing exercises can help you to manage stress and anxiety
- Try to get a good night's sleep (see *page 29* for a guide on sleep)
- Limit alcohol and caffeine (see *page 31* for a guide on alcohol)

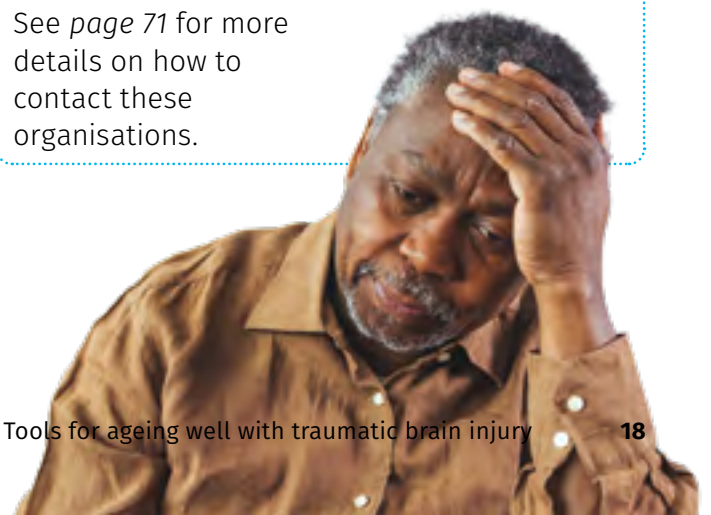
Where to get help

Talk to your GP about getting a referral for a clinical psychologist or psychiatrist who has experience with brain injury. They can help you to learn how to manage anxiety and stress.

Support organisations:

- Synapse: <https://synapse.org.au>
- WayAhead: <https://wayahead.org.au>
- Beyondblue: <https://beyondblue.org.au>
- 13Yarn: <https://13yarn.org.au>

See *page 71* for more details on how to contact these organisations.



Depressed mood

Why people ageing with traumatic brain injury may feel depressed

As you age, you may start to feel down or sad, especially if health problems keep you from doing things you enjoy or from spending time with family or friends. Finding it hard to control your emotions after a brain injury (especially with frontal lobe injury) may also increase the risk of depression as you age.

How do I know if I am depressed?

- Feeling down or sad
- Feeling flat or numb
- Having trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- Having difficulty concentrating
- Feeling fatigued
- Experiencing changes in appetite
- Losing motivation
- Losing interest in activities or socialising

It is common for people to experience depressed mood after a brain injury. If you have most of these symptoms for longer than two weeks or any of these symptoms are making your day-to-day life hard you should get help from a health professional.

If you have thoughts of hurting yourself or suicidal thoughts, please contact a GP or helpline. If these thoughts are getting uncontrollable call 000 or present to a hospital Emergency Department.

How to prevent or manage depressed mood

- Talk to a health professional – you don't have to manage this alone
- Take your medication as prescribed
- Make time to socialise with your family and friends
- Letting people close to you know how you are feeling can be helpful
- Make time to take part in leisure activities you enjoy
- Plan weekly physical activity (see *page 26* for a guide on physical activity)
- Eat a balanced diet that includes foods that can help to boost your mood (see *page 25* for a guide on nutrition)
- Manage stress
- Try meditation and breathing exercises
- Try to get a good night's sleep (see *page 29* for a guide on sleep)
- Make sure you get at least 10-minutes of sunlight each day. You get Vitamin D from sunlight, and it is important for regulating your mood and increasing muscle coordination
- Limit alcohol – it is a depressant (see *page 31* for a guide on alcohol)

Where to get help

Talk to your GP about getting a referral for a clinical psychologist or psychiatrist with experience with brain injury. They can help you to learn to manage depressed mood.

Support organisations:

- Synapse: <https://synapse.org.au>
- WayAhead: <https://wayahead.org.au>
- Beyondblue: <https://beyondblue.org.au>
- 13Yarn: <https://13yarn.org.au>
- This Way Up: <https://thiswayup.org.au>
- Black Dog Institute: <https://blackdoginstitute.org.au>

