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Managing Anger – Tips for Brain Injury Survivors

Introduction

Anger can be a particular problem for people after a brain injury. It can lead to unpredictable behaviour, which can be destructive and aggressive. While some people with a brain injury feel at the mercy of this powerful emotion, others barely notice its presence or impact.

If you are aware your anger causes problems for you and those around you, you will want to learn to keep your anger under control. There are two reasons why it is important to control your anger:

- It can lead to aggressive or impulsive behaviour
- It can affect your thinking and speaking

All our skills work best when we are calm. As your anger increases it can affect how you receive information, your memory and how well you speak. This can lead to you becoming frustrated and perhaps even angrier. If you already have problems in any of these areas, your anger will only make them worse.

Coping with anger

The best way to reduce your anger is to remove yourself from the situation. You need to calm your body and thoughts before you deal with the situation. Then think about the following things:

- Is it something worth dealing with? If so plan your response calmly
- Is it worth getting angry over? If not, let it drop

You may not like the idea of walking away because:

- It can be seen as 'backing down' and make you feel inadequate
- The effect of your brain injury means it can be difficult to stop angry thoughts. You may get stuck on an idea and need to express it

It is important to remember that if you are calm you will be more able to deal with your problems and explain yourself to others.

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What can help?

- 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.
- Practise 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.

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Physical activity

Some people believe that they must do something physical to let their anger out. While punching a punch bag is better than punching another person it may cause problems. It will use up some adrenaline, but the thoughts that caused the anger will not have changed. It is difficult to punch something and have calming thoughts as well.

If you get in the habit of releasing your anger by hitting something, what happens when the punch bag is not there? If you do need to do something physical while angry, other activities such as running, swimming or gardening can help. Try to slow down towards the end of the activity to allow your body to relax and to calm yourself down. You will then be more likely to be able to think things through clearly.

Conclusion

Remember, managing anger is not about taking it away it is about giving you control and choice. Anger is a natural emotion and you may need it one day to give you a serious message. Try to anticipate your anger in order to stay one step ahead it.

To discuss any issues raised in this factsheet or to find details of our local Groups and Branches, please contact the Headway helpline free of charge on 0808 800 2244 or by email at helpline@headway.org.uk. You can also find more information and contact details of Groups and Branches on our website at www.headway.org.uk.

This factsheet is adapted from the Headway booklet *Managing Anger after Brain Injury*, which contains more detailed information. To order this or any other Headway booklets contact us on 0115 924 0800 or visit our website at www.headway.org.uk. Our factsheets are available to download free of charge from the website and copies can also be ordered from the Helpline.

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