



Irritability / anger after traumatic brain injury

a self-help guide



Contents

Why do people get angry?p.3

Why is anger common after brain injury?p.4

How is anger treated?p.6

Strategies for overcoming anger:

- Identifying the triggers for your angerp.7
- Identifying the warning signs of angerp.9
- Identifying the negative thoughtsp.10
- Challenge the negative thoughtsp.12
- Remembering the drawbacks of anger.....p.15
- Adaptive emotion expressionp.16
- Exercisep.17
- Sleepp.18
- Social supportp.19
- Distractionp.20
- Relaxation.....p.21

Further informationp.22

Who is this guide for?

This guide is for people with brain injuries, their relatives, caregivers, and professionals working in this area. The guidance has been developed by psychological practitioners at Headwise Ltd and is based on best clinical practice guidelines and psychotherapeutic approaches to anger. Some individuals are more likely to gain benefit than others. In particular, those with difficulties around memory, language, and abstract reasoning may struggle to complete the exercises. This guide should not be seen as a replacement for therapy. If you would like to discuss the appropriateness of psychological therapy then please contact your GP or alternatively speak to one of the Headwise team.

Why do people get angry?

Anger is a normal human emotion that all of us feel sometimes. The anger response has been in humans since the earliest stages of our development as a species. Historically it has served many benefits. It brings about a number of physiological changes in our bodies that make us more skilled at fighting and defending ourselves. It is also a useful communication strategy in that it highlights to others that we feel very strongly about something and others need to take notice. However, in modern day societies the anger response is less appropriate. Now we have institutions designed to protect us or represent our views so that we no longer have to respond with anger or violence. However, that anger response is built into us and it sometimes rises to the surface. This is normal but for some people this occurs too often and/or can have serious repercussions.



"My emotions could switch so quickly. One moment I'd be talking to someone, then I'd flip. Maybe they'd say something I didn't like or I'd notice something in the background that riled me up. Often it didn't seem that important later, but at the time..."

"There were certain things that would always set me off. Waiting for one thing. I'd get increasingly tense. I'd be looking at the person thinking 'why are you taking so long, why aren't you prepared'. I also hated it when plans would change and I'd just be expected to go with it. It felt like people were totally inconsiderate."



Why is anger common after brain injury?

Anger issues occur in at least a third of brain injury survivors, with some studies showing it affects over half of survivors. It is more common in those who have had more severe brain injuries and those who have acquired cognitive (i.e. thinking) difficulties. It can present in many forms such as feeling tense, swearing, shouting, threats, destruction of property, and violence. There are a number of factors that contribute to the increased prevalence of anger issues after brain injury and these are best understood by using what we refer to as the **biopsychosocial** model ...

Bio – this refers to the physical/biological changes in the brain and body that contribute to anger.

Psycho – this refers to the psychological changes (i.e. changes in how the person thinks about things) that contribute to anger.

Social – the changes to a person's environment that contribute to anger.

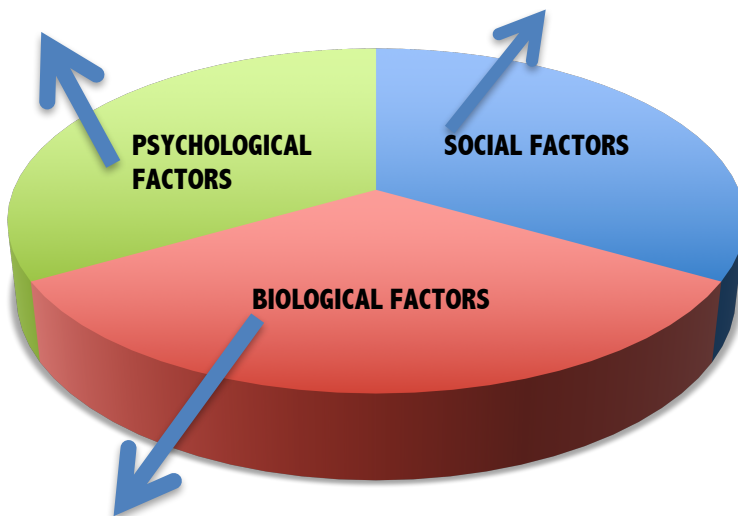
The diagram below shows the biological, psychological and social changes that are often seen after brain injury that may be contributing to your difficulties with mood.

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS:

Brain injury survivors often report a sense of loss and a perception of reduced competence. They find it harder to problem solve and express themselves. Life can feel out of control and confusing. All these issues can contribute to irritability.

SOCIAL FACTORS:

Brain injury can result in reduced freedom of movement and privacy. Opportunities to socialise, engage in hobbies, and let off steam are reduced. The individual may be unable to return home and their new environment may be confusing and over-stimulating.



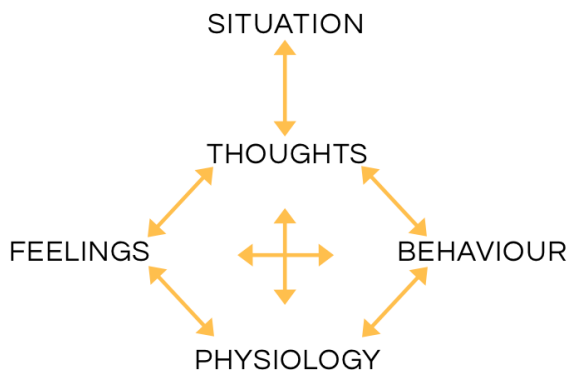
BIOLOGICAL FACTORS:

Brain injuries tend to result in damage to the frontal regions of the brain, which are responsible for behaviour/emotion control, awareness of our limitations (i.e. insight), and communication. All these factors are linked to anger.

How is anger treated?

The National Institute for Health & Care Excellence (NICE) is tasked with identifying the most evidence-based treatments for psychological and behavioural disorders. Whilst no formal guidance has been produced for anger *per se*, they have put together treatment recommendations for conditions in which anger is a symptom (e.g. depression, anxiety, stress). There is good evidence that talking therapies (discussed below) can help. In some cases, medication may also be recommended and you may wish to discuss this option with your GP.

Talking Therapies refer to a range of counselling approaches, usually undertaken by a psychologist. One of the most effective approaches is called Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). It involves understanding how our emotions are influenced by the way that we think about things and the way we react to these thoughts and feelings. Through modifying our thoughts and our responses it is possible to improve our emotional well-being. This booklet will outline a number of self-help strategies from the CBT approach.



The CBT model

Strategies for overcoming anger

1. Identify the triggers of your irritability / anger

Identifying when and where you get upset provides some insight into why you are getting angry. People find that their mood drops in certain places, with certain people, at particular times of the day, etc. The best way to ascertain this information is to keep a thought diary, making a record of all the times during the day you feel upset or irritable and what is going on at, or just before, this time. Try and note down when this occurs for you.

Date / Time	Trigger	Thoughts	Emotions
Monday 3:15pm	Going round the supermarket doing my weekly shop and someone was blocking the aisle with their trolley.	"What a completely inconsiderate person. They have no respect for other people"	Anger Frustration

Strategies for overcoming anger

1. Identify the triggers of your irritability / anger continued

Once we have a list of the various triggers for our anger we can then begin to consider how we might reduce the impact of these triggers. This might involve:

- ***Avoiding the trigger*** – sometimes it might be possible to avoid entirely the thing that causes us irritation. For example, if someone found supermarket shopping to be a trigger for anger then they might benefit from shopping at a smaller store or using a home delivery service for their groceries.
- ***Minimising or adapting our exposure to the trigger*** – it may not always be possible to avoid the thing that irritates us. However, sometimes we can modify our exposure to it so that it is less likely to cause irritation. For example, if we stick with the supermarket example, you might choose to go at quieter times of the day or break up your weekly shop into smaller daily shopping trips so that the time you spend in the supermarket is reduced.
- ***Exit strategies*** – consider how to respond to increases in irritation so that it doesn't escalate to anger. How would you remove yourself from the situation in a prompt but appropriate fashion?
- ***Use of rewards*** – it may be easier to keep our irritation under control if we have something to look forward to. For example, a supermarket trip could be followed by a meal at your favourite pub.

Strategies for overcoming anger

2. Identify the warning signs of anger

Sometimes we fail to notice an escalation in our irritability until it is too late. However, if we learn to identify the warning signs then we can take action before our anger boils over. Imagine your anger were a set of traffic lights. A green light indicates you are feeling relaxed, amber is when you are beginning to get tense, and red light is when you are on the verge of letting out your anger. Have a think about how you might recognise when you are in each of these zones. Perhaps ask a friend/relative whether they notice changes in your behaviour.

RED LIGHT: ANGER

AMBER LIGHT: TENSE

GREEN LIGHT: RELAXED



Strategies for overcoming anger

3. Identify the negative thoughts that trigger anger

Our anger results not from an event on its own, but from our interpretation of that event. Imagine if you found your car did not start one day. Your level of anger would be affected by whether you were due to drive to the airport to start your holiday or whether it meant you had to miss work. Thoughts are the ideas that go through our head when we try to make sense of a situation. They are our appraisals and our explanations.

Below are some examples of the types of thoughts we might have to explain a situation. See if you can identify some anger thoughts that might go in the empty spaces ...

Date / Time	Trigger	Thoughts
Monday 9:15am	Running late for an appointment and stuck behind a slow driver	<i>"Get a move on. This thoughtless idiot is going to make me late!"</i>
Tuesday 7pm	Children playing noisily outside the front of my house	
Friday 10am	Hospital appointment cancelled at short notice.	
Sunday 5pm	Friend did not call me when they said they would	

Strategies for overcoming anger

3. Identifying negative thoughts continued...

When people are angry often their thoughts are critical of others and they perceive themselves to be hard done by. Often we see the other person's actions as being deliberate and we imagine that we would have behaved differently. Our anger can result from feeling out of control and feeling a need to take back control.

Use the blank spaces below to record some of the thoughts you have when you are feeling irritable or angry ...

1.

2.

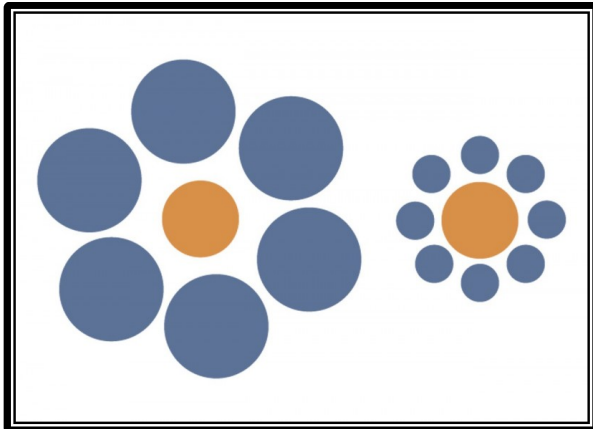
3.

4.

Strategies for overcoming anger

4. Challenging the negative thoughts

Our thoughts are not always accurate. There can also often be more than one way to see a situation. Take the pictures below. Most people believe the orange circle on the right to be larger than the orange circle on the left, yet they are in fact the same size. This shows that ***our perceptions can be fallible and influenced by other things going on around it.*** Now look at the picture on the right. Do you see a young lady looking away, or an old lady with a headscarf? The truth is that both images are present, but most people only see one picture until they know to look for the other. Therefore ***there are at least two ways to see the same situation.*** Both of these principles are crucial when we seek to challenge our anger thoughts.



A. Which orange circle is larger?



B. Old or young lady?

Strategies for overcoming anger

4. Challenging our negative thoughts continued...

In order to challenge our negative thoughts there are a number of strategies that can be helpful:

- a. ***Ask yourself whether there are any other factors that may have been going on in that person's life that could excuse their behaviour.*** For example, if someone neglects their manners perhaps their thoughts are pre-occupied by a family health worry.
- b. ***Ask yourself whether you are jumping to conclusions about what the person is like and why they acted the way they did.*** For example, unless you know the person well then it might be premature to judge them.
- c. ***Ask yourself whether you might have contributed to the incident in any way.*** For example, if you let your irritation show then perhaps the person acted defensively and this came across as them being rude.
- d. ***Ask yourself whether you have ever behaved in a way that is similar to what has upset you.*** For example, if you are upset at someone's timekeeping, ask yourself whether you have ever been late before.
- e. ***Ask someone else to read over your negative thoughts and comment on whether they think your conclusions are fair.***

Strategies for overcoming anger

4. Challenging our negative thoughts continued...

- f. **Look for the evidence and counter-evidence for your thoughts.** For example, if you think someone is inconsiderate, ask yourself whether there have been times when they have been kind to you.

The table below provides a worked example of how we might use thought challenging to explore the accuracy of our initial appraisals. More often than not, the more balanced thought leads to the person feeling less tense.

Negative thought	Evidence for	Evidence against	More balanced thought
In response to a friend being late ... "They are completely out of order. I would never let down a friend"	<ul style="list-style-type: none">* It is bad to be late for friends.* It is seldom that you are late for your friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none">* You are aware that they have been stressed lately and forgetful.* They have always been considerate of you in the past.* There have been times when you have been late for friends in the past and you didn't mean any offence by this	"It's frustrating that my friend was late. However, I don't know why this is and perhaps they have things going on in their life right now. After all, even I can be late for friends every now and again when I'm stressed."

Strategies for overcoming anger

5. Remembering the drawbacks of anger

In the introduction chapter we spoke about how anger was once helpful during our earlier development but now its usefulness is limited. In fact anger is often associated with negative outcomes, which is possibly a big reason why you are seeking support for it. During times when we feel tense it can be important to remind ourselves of the problems that anger can cause. This provides us with the motivation to keep our behaviour in check. Have a go at noting down some of these issues below ...

- 1. *Example: "I feel really guilty afterwards"* _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____
- 4. _____
- 5. _____
- 6. _____
- 7. _____
- 8. _____
- 9. _____

Strategies for overcoming anger

6. Adaptive emotion expression techniques

It is normal to feel frustrated at times and it can be helpful to let out that tension, but in ways that don't upset others. Many of us play sports, go to the gym, or do other things that allow us to let out tension. Sometimes after a brain injury it is harder to find ways of letting out frustration in a socially acceptable way and so it festers and boils over into anger. It can therefore be helpful to develop a list of strategies to let out tension in the moment, but without becoming angry or aggressive ...

- 1. *Example: "squeezing a stress ball or punching a pillow"*

- 2. -----
- 3. -----
- 4. -----
- 5. -----
- 6. -----
- 7. -----
- 8. -----
- 9. -----

Strategies for overcoming anger

7. Exercise and physical activity

Research has shown that being physically active is good for our mental health. Not only does it result in positive chemical changes in the body, it also focuses our thoughts externally and helps us stop mulling things over. It also allows us to let out frustration. As a guide, try and set yourself the goal of getting at least 20 minutes exercise per day. Alternatively, if you'd prefer less strenuous exercise then try and walk 10,000 steps each day.



Strategies for overcoming anger

8. Improved sleep

It is well recognised that people become more irritable when they are tired. We become less able to focus on things, the world feels like it's going too fast, and we might have difficulty formulating solutions to our problems. All these things combine to make us more susceptible to anger outbursts. Most adults require 7-8 hours of sleep and there are a number of lifestyle choices that can be effective in aiding a refreshing sleep cycle ...

- a. Go to bed at a regular time each night and rise at the same time, even if you have not had a good night's sleep.
- b. Avoid the temptation to sleep during the day.
- c. Ensure you are active during the day and that this includes getting fresh air.
- d. Avoid caffeine after 6pm as well as sugary sweets and drinks. Try and not smoke in the 2 hours leading up to bed.
- e. Warm milky drinks release a substance called Tryptophan, which helps aid sleep.
- f. Avoid stimulating activities (e.g. action movies, computer games) in the run up to bed. Instead, try to read or listen to relaxing music or talk radio.
- g. Try and keep a regular routine in the run up to bed. This helps prepare you mentally for sleep.
- h. Don't go to bed hungry.

Strategies for overcoming anger

9. Social support

When we are irritable it can be helpful to have someone to talk to. This can be to gain reassurance, vent our frustrations, distract us from whatever is bothering us, or help us think about things in a different way.

Try and make a list of up to 5 people who you feel you can turn to when you're feeling irritable ...

	<i>Person's name</i>	<i>Tel number</i>
1.	_____	_____
2.	_____	_____
3.	_____	_____
4.	_____	_____
5.	_____	_____

Strategies for overcoming anger

10. Distraction and relaxation

When we feel irritated it is common for us to mull over our thoughts around whatever has upset us. As we do this, our irritation increases and increases until it may eventually boil over into anger or aggression. One way to stop this happening is to break this negative thought spiral by finding something that can distract our thoughts. This should be something that is mentally engaging. Common strategies include:

- Completing puzzles, quizzes or crosswords
- Watching a film or television programme
- Listening to music
- Watching videos on YouTube
- Reading jokes online
- Going for a walk
- Speaking to friends

Have a think about strategies you have found helpful in the past in taking your mind off things and list them below:

1. _____	5. _____
2. _____	6. _____
3. _____	7. _____
4. _____	8. _____

Strategies for overcoming anger

10. Distraction and relaxation continued ...

Another way to take our mind off whatever has upset us is to engage in relaxation exercise. Like the above distraction strategies, relaxation exercises help us focus our thoughts on something other than what is annoying us. However, they have the additional benefit of creating a pleasant and relaxed physiological sensation in our body; the opposite of how it feels when we are irritable. Relaxation exercises fall into the following categories:

- ***Breathing exercises:*** These exercises focus on slowing down the rate of breathing and being increasingly aware of the physiological sensation of breathing.
- ***Progressive muscle relaxation exercises:*** These exercises involve tensing and relaxing various muscle groups across the body.
- ***Visual imagery exercises:*** These exercises involve listening to a scene being described and picturing that pleasant scene in your head.
- ***Mindfulness exercises:*** These exercises are based on meditation and encourage the listener to become increasingly aware of the 'here & now'.

There are numerous examples of each of these exercises available for free on the internet.

Further information

Headwise Ltd

www.headwise.org.uk / 0121 222 5342

Headwise provides therapy services for people with brain injury



MIND

www.mind.org.uk / 020 8519 2122

MIND provides information and support for people with mental health difficulties



Headway

www.headway.org.uk / 0808 800 2244

Headway provides information and support for people with brain injury



the brain injury association

The British Psychological Society

www.bps.org.uk / 0116 254 9568

The BPS provides a directory of psychological therapists in your area.



The
British
Psychological
Society

This information leaflet was developed by Dr Alan Gray (Clinical Psychologist) through Headwise Ltd. It should not be reproduced or altered in any way. This guide is designed to inform people about psychotherapeutic approaches to anger after brain injury; it is not designed to act as a replacement to therapy.

Headwise Ltd is a leading national independent provider of specialist services to adults, children and families. We deliver rehabilitation and assessments to individuals with cognitive, physical, emotional and neurobehavioural impairments resulting from brain injury and other neurological conditions. If you would like to learn more about our services or if you wish to make a referral then please contact the Headwise team at the following address:

Headwise Ltd
Innovation Centre
Longbridge Technology Park
Longbridge
Birmingham
B31 2TS



Tel. 0121 222 5342
info@headwise.org.uk

© Headwise 2017

Reproduction of this leaflet is prohibited without prior permission.