

Michelle #jumbledbrain

FROM SURVIVING A BRAIN INJURY TO THRIVING

HOW MENTAL HEALTH CAN BE AFFECTED FOLLOWING A BRAIN INJURY

Issues following a brain injury that may lead to a decline in mental health include grief and loss, adjustment to disability, pre-injury personality traits and strengths, coping skills and level of social support.

These consequences are not reserved for people who have experienced more severe forms of brain injury. It can affect all types. In 2013, a group of Danish scientists found that individuals with TBI (including concussions) were four times more likely to develop a mental illness. People who had received a TBI were 65 percent more likely to develop schizophrenia, 59 percent more likely to develop depression and 28 percent more likely to develop bipolar disorder. This study is the largest of its kind and involved following 1.4 million Danish citizens born between the years 1977 and 2000.

DUAL DIAGNOSIS OF BRAIN INJURY AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

It may be the case that there is a dual diagnosis and that you require support from both mental health and brain injury services. If this is the case then you will realistically likely need to find separate services for both, as they are rarely treated together. As well as this, you may find that mental health services will not support you because of a diagnosis of brain injury, or vice versa.

Different types of treatment are offered for different mental health conditions, and different things will work for different people. Advice on, and referrals for treatment should always be given by appropriately trained medical professionals, and treatment should always be offered on a case-by-case basis.

The effects of brain injury and mental illness can look very similar, so misdiagnosis is possible if there are no clear medical records.

A mental illness can affect the rehabilitation process due to low motivation and creating unhelpful coping mechanisms and a negative mind set. It can lead to social isolation, family breakdown, unemployment, aggression and risk of exploitation.



WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP MYSELF?

Experiencing depression can make it hard to find the energy to look after yourself. But taking an active role in your treatment, and taking steps to help yourself cope with your experiences, can make a big difference to how you feel.

Food and mood - When you have highs and lows in your blood sugar levels it can have a dramatic effect on your mood.

- Eating breakfast gets the day off to a good start.
- Instead of a large lunch and dinner, try eating smaller portions spaced out regularly throughout the day.
- Avoid foods which make your blood sugar rise and fall rapidly, such as sweets, biscuits, sugary drinks, and alcohol.
- It's recommended that you drink between 6-8 glasses of fluid a day.
- Tea, coffee, juices and smoothies all count towards your intake (but be aware that these may also contain caffeine or sugar).
- Protein contains amino acids, which make up the chemicals your brain needs to regulate your thoughts and feelings. It also helps keep you feeling fuller for longer.
Protein is in: lean meat, fish, eggs, cheese, legumes (peas, beans and lentils), soya products, nuts and seeds.

- Your brain needs fatty acids (such as omega-3 and -6) to keep it working well. So rather than avoiding all fats, it's important to eat the right ones.
Healthy fats are found in: oily fish, poultry, nuts (especially walnuts and almonds), olive and sunflower oils, seeds (such as sunflower and pumpkin), avocados, milk, yoghurt, cheese and eggs.
- Try to avoid anything which lists 'trans fats' or 'partially hydrogenated oils' in the list of ingredients (such as some shop-bought cakes and biscuits). They can be tempting when you're feeling low, but this kind of fat isn't good for your mood or your physical health in the long run. Your brain needs fatty acids (such as omega-3 and -6) to keep it working well. So rather than avoiding all fats, it's important to eat the right ones.
- Deficiencies in B vitamins such as folic acid and B-12 can trigger depression. To get more, take a B-complex vitamin supplement or eat more citrus fruit, leafy greens, beans, chicken, and eggs.
- Check if you're anemic. Low iron levels can cause low moods. Red meat, tofu, nuts and dried fruit are all good sources of iron.
- Lack of vitamin D can also affect energy levels, increase joint pain and lower your mood. It is created in the body when we are in the sun, but you can top it up with Fatty fish, like tuna, mackerel, and salmon. Beef liver, Cheese and Egg yolks are good too.

Create a resilience toolkit - This could be a list of activities you know improve your mood, or you could fill an actual box with things to do to cheer yourself up. Try including your favourite book or film, a notebook and pen to write down your thoughts or notes of encouragement to yourself. It might feel difficult or a bit silly to put it all together but it can be a really useful tool if you're feeling too low to come up with ideas later on.

CHALLENGE NEGATIVE THINKING

When these types of thoughts overwhelm you, it's important to remember that this is a symptom of your depression and these irrational, pessimistic attitudes (known as cognitive distortions) aren't realistic.

When you really examine them they don't hold up. But even so, they can be tough to give up. You can't break out of this pessimistic mind frame by telling yourself to "just think positive." Often, it's part of a lifelong pattern of thinking that's become so automatic you're not even completely aware of it. Rather, the trick is to identify the type of negative thoughts that are fueling your depression, and replace them with a more balanced way of thinking.

All-or-nothing thinking – Looking at things in black-or-white categories, with no middle ground ("If I fall short of perfection, I'm a total failure.")

Overgeneralization – Generalizing from a single negative experience, expecting it to hold true forever ("I can't do anything right.")

The mental filter – Ignoring positive events and focusing on the negative. Noticing the one thing that went wrong, rather than all the things that went right.

Diminishing the positive – Coming up with reasons why positive events don't count ("She said she had a good time on our date, but I think she was just being nice.")

Jumping to conclusions – Making negative interpretations without actual evidence. You act like a mind reader ("He must think I'm pathetic") or a fortune teller ("I'll be stuck in this dead-end job forever.")

Emotional reasoning – Believing that the way you feel reflects reality ("I feel like such a loser. I really am no good!")

'Shoulds' and 'should-nots' – Holding yourself to a strict list of what you should and shouldn't do, and beating yourself up if you don't live up to your rules.

Labeling – Classifying yourself based on mistakes and perceived shortcomings ("I'm a failure; an idiot; a loser.")

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Once you identify the destructive thought patterns that contribute to your depression, you can start to challenge them with questions such as:

- “What’s the evidence that this thought is true? Not true?”
- “What would I tell a friend who had this thought?”
- “Is there another way of looking at the situation or an alternate explanation?”
- “How might I look at this situation if I didn’t have depression?”

As you cross-examine your negative thoughts, you may be surprised at how quickly they crumble. In the process, you’ll develop a more balanced perspective and help to relieve your depression.

I'd love to hear how this has helped you.

Have you got ideas and strategies that work for you but I missed out? Don't be shy, let me know.

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LIFESTYLE CHOICES

Take on responsibilities - When you’re depressed, you may want to pull back from life and give up your responsibilities at home and at work. Don’t. Staying involved and having daily responsibilities can help you maintain a lifestyle that can help counter depression. They ground you and give you a sense of accomplishment. Volunteering is a great place to start, even if that’s just helping an elderly neighbour from time to time.

Do something new - Push yourself to do something different. Go to a museum. Pick up a used book and read it on a park bench. Volunteer at a soup kitchen. Take a language class. When we challenge ourselves to do something different, there are chemical changes in the brain. Trying something new alters the levels of dopamine, which is associated with pleasure, enjoyment, and learning.

Try to have fun - If you’re depressed, make time for things you enjoy. If nothing seems fun anymore that’s just a symptom of depression. You have to keep trying anyway. As strange as it might sound, you have to work at having fun. Plan things you used to enjoy, even if they feel like a chore. When you’re depressed, you can lose the knack for enjoying life. You have to relearn how to do it. In time, fun things really will feel fun again.