

Managing Stress after an Acquired Brain Injury

What is Stress?

Stress is part of everyday life and a natural reaction to change and adjustment to major life changes. Our bodies respond to stress with the "fight or flight" response in the central nervous system, which involves a series of chemical changes that help us to prepare to face the stressful situation.

When the fight or flight response is activated too often, this can result in negative effects. Some of these effects can include reduced protection from disease and infection; hypertension; heart, liver and kidney conditions and psychological problems.

Recognising the signs of stress

Physical signs of a stress response can include:

- Rapid heartbeat
- Headaches
- Stomach aches
- Muscle tension

Emotional signs of stress can include:

- Frustration
- Nervousness
- Discouragement
- Anxiety
- Anger/Irritability

Stress and Acquired Brain Injury

Following an acquired brain injury, factors such as role changes within the family, financial pressures and forced unemployment can all add to the burden of stress experienced by the injured person.

Tiredness, fatigue and a disrupted routine, all of which are common with an acquired brain injury, can also contribute to increased levels of stress.

Additionally, most people with a brain injury find it much harder to deal with stress. When coping with stress, we use a lot of mental energy in order to recognise symptoms, create strategies to cope and remember techniques for coping. A brain injury can dramatically impact our ability to do all this, resulting in a lowered ability to cope with stress.



Understanding and Managing Stress

The first and most important way to reduce stress is to become aware of the sources of it. One way to do this might be through a stress awareness diary that lists the date and time, the event, its severity, any symptoms and coping strategies used. The next step is to categorise stress into

- Controllable vs Uncontrollable
- Important vs Unimportant

This can help a person view their situation more clearly and objectively.

Key Skills for Managing Stress

- 1. Awareness** - Trying to get a clearer understanding of the situation and how it affects you.
- 2. Acceptance** - Recognising realistically what is controllable and what is not and how that affects you.
- 3. Coping Skills** - Learning various strategies, such as relaxation, meditation, positive thinking, exercise, creativity, etc.
- 4. Action Skills** - Making the changes to counteract or reduce the level of stress.

Coping strategies for managing stress

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

In this technique a person learns to identify muscle groups and the difference between tension and relaxation in the muscles. Focus on the 4 main muscle groups working from the feet upwards:

- Thighs, buttocks, calves and feet
- Chest, stomach and lower back
- Head, face, throat and shoulders
- Hands, forearms and biceps

Tense individual muscles for 5-7 seconds and relax for 10-15 seconds. This should be done twice a day for 15 minutes.

Slow breathing techniques

First, focus on your breathing pattern. Identify whether you breathe mainly through the chest or through the stomach. Try to avoid short,

shallow, rapid breaths from the upper chest. The aim is to breathe deeply and slowly through the nose. You should feel greater movement in the stomach than the chest as you inhale and exhale. Practice breathing exercises for 5 minutes every day.

Exercise and Nutrition

Regular exercise and a healthy diet can help you to bring down your stress level. Try to cut down on the amount of tea, coffee, cola, alcohol, cigarettes, and sugar you take and you should feel the benefit quite quickly.



Learning to choose a less stressful life

One way to cope with stress is to take "time out" from stressful situations as often as you can. Even if this means taking just 20 minutes to do something you want to do every day. Try to see if you can arrange to have this short "time out". Most people find that this makes a difference.

Other techniques

Meditation, Yoga, Tai Chi, Acupuncture, Support Groups, and therapies such as massage and reflexology have all been shown to benefit people under stress. So, they could be worth trying out. Remember, if you feel too stressed, don't suffer on your own - talk to someone you trust and get the help you need.