



Depression and Brain Injury

This handout describes how brain injury may affect depression. A list of resources is included.

What is depression?

After a brain injury it is normal to feel sad about the injury and the resulting problems that you must cope with.

“Depression” is more than feeling sad. It involves a negative and persisting change in your current mood and future outlook. It can also affect your physical well-being. If you have depression, you may feel hopeless, helpless, or worthless. You may have rapid weight loss or gain, sleep too little or too much, have problems concentrating, or have no interest in seeing your friends or family. You may even have thoughts of killing yourself or wishing you were dead.

While some of these symptoms can occur for reasons other than depression, if you have any of these symptoms, tell your doctor, psychologist, nurse, social worker, or any other health care provider. They can help you find out more about depression, which is very treatable.

Why does a brain injury produce or trigger depression?

It is often normal to feel depressed after a brain injury, when you cannot easily do the things you used to be able to do. Knowing that it may take a long time to heal and improve might also cause depression.

A brain injury can also affect the production and absorption of natural chemicals in your brain. These chemicals help balance your mood by letting you feel happy or sad. When these chemicals are reduced or depleted, you may feel depressed or a low mood may get worse.

What happens with depression?

People with depression often:

- Have a hard time finding pleasure in life.
- Have negative thoughts.
- Find it hard to focus on daily tasks.
- Feel irritable.
- Have low self-esteem.
- Feel like they don't have much energy or enthusiasm.
- Cry.
- Become socially isolated.

It is difficult for someone with depression to believe that they will ever have a happy future. A depressed person also may sleep and eat too little or too much. This can lead to lower energy, weight loss or gain, and disrupted thinking.

What makes depression worse?

- Stress.
- Staying in bed all day.
- Lack of exercise.
- Avoiding people.
- Not taking medicines as prescribed, if you are on medicines.

When should I ask for help with depression?

Talk with your doctor if:

- You are having any of the symptoms of depression listed above.
- Your depression is stopping you from caring for yourself or your family.
- You don't think your medicine for depression is working.
- You are thinking about hurting or killing yourself, or you wish you were dead.
- You have tried to hurt or kill yourself.

What can I do about depression?

Follow recommendations from your health care professionals:

- Take medicines as they are prescribed. If you have depression, your doctor might give you a medicine to help the natural mood chemicals in your brain work better. Often a low dose of one of these medicines is enough to treat your depression.
- Be honest with your health care provider about your mood and how you feel.

Participate in treatment:

- Talk to a psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker, or licensed counselor for psychotherapy support.
- Join a support group or a therapy treatment group.
- Participate in neuro-rehabilitation treatments such as occupational therapy (OT), physical therapy (PT), or speech or vocational rehabilitation counseling. This may help you improve your ability to do things, and your feelings of well-being.
- Spend time with friends or family.
- Set realistic goals for yourself.
- Reward yourself for positive thoughts and actions.
- Do something helpful for someone else.

Take care of your body:

- Exercise.
- Eat food that is healthy.
- Reduce your alcohol intake.
- Reduce or eliminate smoking.
- During the day, sit in a sunny or well-lit room.
- Get outside for some fresh air.
- Stay out of bed during the day.
- Treat yourself to a massage or a bubble bath.

Learn ways to relax:

- Notice positive things in your life.
- Make a list of your skills and positive qualities.
- Do yoga or tai chi.

- Practice deep-breathing techniques.
- Listen to a tape on guided imagery.
- Meditate or pray.
- Listen to soothing music.
- Go for a walk.
- Talk with a friend or family member.
- Do a hobby you enjoy.
- Laugh.
- Watch a funny movie.
- Sign up for a class.
- Sing in a choir.
- Volunteer.
- Play with your dog or cat.
- Do at least one pleasant activity each day.

Where can I learn more about depression?

Ask a professional:

- Tell your doctor, your psychologist, your nurse, or your rehabilitation therapists that you are feeling depressed.
- Ask for a referral to a psychologist or psychiatrist who is familiar with the effects of brain injury.
- Consider participating in a research study on depression.

Check out these resources:

Brain Injury Association of America

www.biausa.org/

8201 Greensboro Drive, Suite 611, McLean, VA 22102

703-761-0750

Brain Injury Information Hotline: 800-444-6443

Brain Injury Association of Washington

www.biawa.org/

3516 S. 47th Street, Suite 100, Tacoma, WA 98409

253-238-6085

Helpline: 800-523-5438

E-mail: info@biawa.org

Questions?

Call 206-598-4295

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC clinic staff are also available to help at any time.

Rehabilitation Medicine:
206-598-4295

University of Washington
Traumatic Brain Injury
Model System:
www.tbi.washington.edu

Multiple Sclerosis Association of America

www.msaa.com

706 Haddonfield Road, Cherry Hill, NJ 08002
856-488-4500

National Brain Tumor Foundation

www.braintumor.org

22 Battery Street, Suite 612, San Francisco, CA 94111
Patient Line: 800-934-2873
E-mail: nbtf@braintumor.org

National Multiple Sclerosis Society

<http://was.nationalmssociety.org>

Greater Washington Chapter
192 Nickerson St., Suite 100
Seattle, WA 98109
800-344-4867
E-mail: greaterWAinfo@nmsswas.org

National Stroke Association

www.stroke.org

9707 E. Easter Lane, Englewood, CO 80112
800-STROKES (800-787-6537)

Alzheimer's Association

www.alz.org

225 N. Michigan Ave., Fl. 17, Chicago, IL 60601
Helpline: 800-272-3900

National Parkinson Foundation

www.parkinson.org

1501 N.W. 9th Avenue, Miami, FL 33136-1494
800-327-4545

Production of this patient information brochure was funded in part by the National Institute for Disability and Rehabilitation Research, Grant #H133A070032.

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
MEDICAL CENTER
UW Medicine

HARBORVIEW
MEDICAL
CENTER 
UW Medicine

Rehabilitation Medicine

Box 356167

1959 N.E. Pacific St. Seattle, WA 98195
206-598-4295