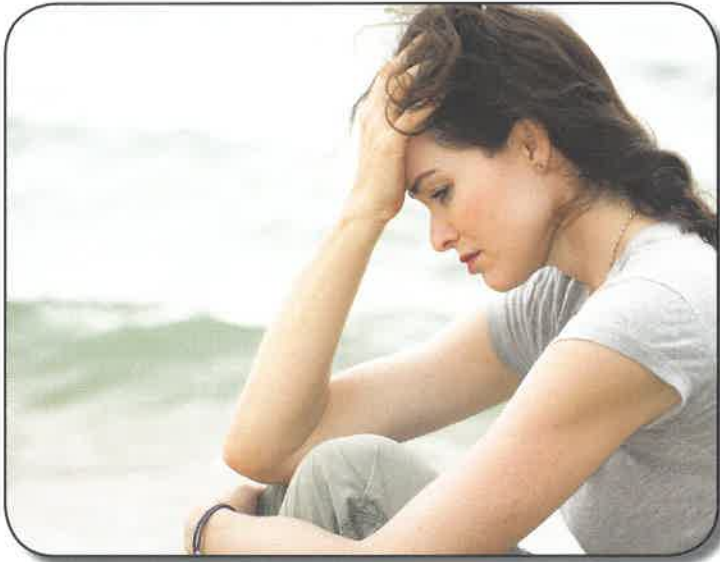


# Managing Anxiety after Acquired Brain Injury (ABI)



*Information Guide for people  
with Acquired Brain Injury and  
their families and friends*

## What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is comprised of a range of feelings that many people will experience at some point in their lives. Feelings of anxiety are often a response to situations that we perceive to be either overwhelming, threatening, frightening or intimidating. It is important to emphasise that anxiety is often a normal response to stressful situations and can be helpful; for example, it can increase levels of attention, alertness and ability to think and act quickly. However, when feelings of anxiety become overpowering, we often feel out of control and this is accompanied by a range of physical and psychological symptoms as outlined below.

## What does Anxiety look like?

Anxiety can change the way a person thinks, feels, and behaves. Symptoms may include:

### Physical symptoms:

- Heart racing
- Sweating
- Breathing gets faster (Hyperventilation)
- Muscle Tension
- Dizziness
- Indigestion
- Diarrhoea

### Psychological symptoms:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Heightened level of alertness
- Startle response (a response to sudden, startling stimuli, such as noise or movement)
- Feeling fearful or worried a lot of the time
- Feeling tired

## What causes Anxiety?

### 1) Psychological response:

Events and experiences we perceive to be very stressful (thoughts) often trigger feelings of anxiety that set off a chain of negative thoughts that 'trigger' the body and mind to become very alert to the perceived threat or danger. If these thoughts continue and remain unchallenged, this can lead to ongoing feelings of anxiety.

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### 2) Physical response:

When we experience a real, or perceived threat or danger, our autonomic response system is activated. This system has evolved in order to ensure our survival and once triggered it is associated with increased adrenaline in our bloodstream in order to enable us to fight or run away ('fight or flight'). High levels of adrenaline can create some of the physical symptoms of anxiety such as palpitations and hyperventilation.

### Anxiety and Acquired Brain Injury (ABI)

- The risk of anxiety can increase following a brain injury as the person tries to cope with the stress of the diagnosis and the associated changes in abilities. ABI can be considered to be a very stressful life event.
- Anxiety can result from the unexpected nature of the ABI.
- Anxiety can result from the confusion and disorientation people often feel following an ABI.
- Severe anxiety can reduce mental energy, ability to concentrate, and ability to feel in control. When these symptoms combine with the effects of the brain injury, the overall effect can feel overwhelming.

### What should you do if you are experiencing symptoms of Anxiety?

The first step is to talk to someone you know and trust about it. If the symptoms continue you should discuss them with your G.P. or a healthcare professional. They will explain why the symptoms are occurring in your situation and will advise you about the various treatment options.

At the NRH, we have a team of Psychologists who have specialised knowledge and expertise in this area and are here to support you. The treatment options include:

- Psychological Therapies: These help you understand and cope with anxiety symptoms.
- Self-help and relaxation technique: These will help you to manage your feelings of anxiety.
- Medication: This can help to reduce the unpleasant effects of the symptoms. You can talk to your GP about medications.

### Quick Snap Shot on what to do when you feel anxious....

- STOP and take a deep breath
- Ask yourself 'what am I reacting to?'
- Ask yourself 'what is the real danger?' or 'is there a real threat or danger?'
- Ask yourself "Is there another way to deal with the situation?"
- Think of all the different ways you have coped in other stressful situations in the past. Are any of these useful in this situation?