

**Anger Problems Following Traumatic Brain Injury**

**Patient Information Booklet**



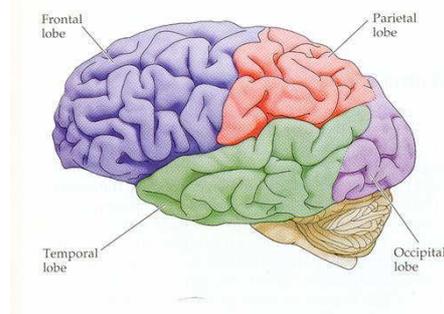
**Talis Consulting Limited**

## Why can Brain Injury Cause Problems with Anger?

Brain injury can damage the areas of the brain that control the more basic impulses, such as anger. Situations that you may have tolerated perfectly well before injury may now cause feeling of rage. When you add in the challenges brain injury creates in day-to-day activities, it is unsurprising that anger problems are such a common occurrence following a brain injury.

The brain is the seat of all our emotions and behaviours, as well as the seat of thinking and memory. This means that injury to the brain can cause problems with emotion just as easily as problems with thinking, reasoning and remembering.

Emotions are often filtered through the frontal lobe of the brain (the area behind the forehead). The frontal lobe is associated with high-level thinking, such as reasoning and problem solving. The frontal lobe is frequently damaged during a brain injury as it can collide with the bones above the eye-sockets. When this area is damaged emotions can just 'shoot out'. There can be a lack of thinking and reasoning about the appropriateness of the outburst.



### *Why do I experience angry outbursts?*

The anger you experience may feel as though it has an on-off quality. Angry outbursts can appear suddenly, even if you are perfectly calm beforehand. Family members may be shocked by these sudden outbursts and can struggle to understand them. It is important that family members understand that outbursts may be due to brain injury.

### *Why do I get now angry about such insignificant things?*

It is common for people to report that it is the minor irritations in life that make them angry, rather than major catastrophes. This is because it is those minor problems that the person would have dealt with so well in the past. Following a brain injury the person may find themselves unable to cope with these minor problems, and this lack of ability leads to frustration and anger.



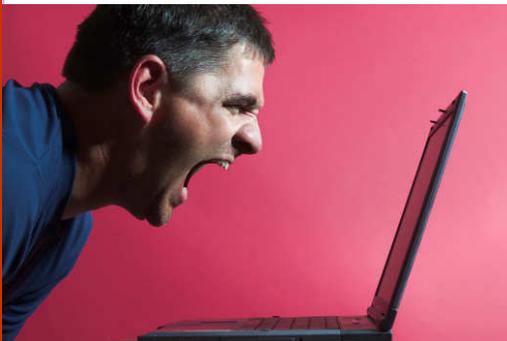
### *Can I re-learn to control my anger?*

Yes. It may be difficult and you may not be as even-tempered as you were before your brain injury, but improvements can be made. Simple steps like thinking before you act and remaining calm will help immensely. Some of these techniques are discussed later in this booklet.

## What Causes my Anger?

It can be important to identify what causes angry outbursts. Different things will agitate different people, so there is no certain situation that will cause anger. Yet it can be helpful to know what underlies the causes of your anger so they can be avoided, or identified early on before you get too wound up. Triggers can be people, places or situations

The exact cause of an outburst of anger can be hard to identify. However there are two general classes of events that can cause anger. These are external events or internal processes.



### *External Events*

External events are things that happen in the outside world. They can often be things that you have no control over, such as noise, things going wrong (like your car not starting or your computer freezing) or they can be the actions of other people.

### *Internal Processes*

Internal processes are the way we feel about the things that are happening to us. These could be feelings of an inability to cope with events, poor self-esteem, depression or fear. Anger can also be triggered by underlying emotions or beliefs, such as feeling rejected, uncared for or not taken seriously enough.

The combination of internal processes and external events means the actual cause for anger can be highly complex. But the main factors that need to be considered when trying to work out what has caused an angry outburst are:



- The environment – a lack of structure, not enough time to complete tasks, too much stimulation
- Your physical state – such as pain or tiredness
- Your mental state – any frustrations or confusion
- How those around you are behaving towards you

By combining all these factors it may help you to step back and try and work out what has caused you to feel so angry.

## What Can be Done to Help Me Cope With My Anger?

It is possible to learn to better control your anger. We all must learn to control our emotions early on in life, and so many of the techniques that can manage anger after a brain injury involve re-learning these methods.

### The 'Stop and Think' Method

The Stop and Think method is designed to prevent inappropriate outbursts of anger. The stop and think method is reliant on you noticing yourself becoming angry, so knowledge of what situations usually cause you to become angry can be particularly useful here. The method can be broken down into three stages:



1). **Stop!** - When you find yourself becoming angry or thinking frustrated thoughts, stop before you react to the situation. Consider whether the thoughts are accurate or helpful. Ask yourself whether this situation will be important in a week's or even an hour's time.

2). **Is This Thought Helpful?** - Challenge any thoughts that you think are inaccurate or unhelpful, consider what the thoughts are doing to you, will getting angry actually change anything?

3). **Go!** - Create a new thought that is more appropriate for dealing with the situation.

Imagine you are waiting in a long line of people to be served in a shop. The line is moving slowly and you feel yourself beginning to get angry. You might be thinking thoughts such as: *"why is the service here so slow? Why can't they just hurry it up?"*.



Stop thinking these thoughts, they are unhelpful and not likely to remedy the situation. Instead think *"Everyone in this line is probably just as frustrated as me, even the person serving us. I could come back another time, or find a way to pass the time such as reading a paper"*.

Notice the clear method of stopping the frustrating thoughts, evaluating them, and coming up with thoughts that are far more appropriate and useful.

## The Calming Method

The calming method is not an alternative to the 'stop and think' method. Whilst some people may find that one method does work better for them, the two methods can be combined very successfully, and also used alongside any other techniques you find useful.

While it would be better to avoid these situations that make you angry in the first place, it is important to be prepared for when you do find yourself becoming angry, and this is where the calming method can be very useful.

The calming method begins in much the same way as the stop and think method. The first step involves recognising when you are becoming angry. Notice whether your muscles get tense, or if your breathing increases. These are tell-tale signs to start the calming method.

The calming method involves a number of techniques that are designed to relax you and soothe your frustrations. Consider some or all of the following:

**Breathing Exercises:** Calm yourself by taking deep breaths from your stomach, not your chest and shoulders. Focus on breathing out slowly and evenly.

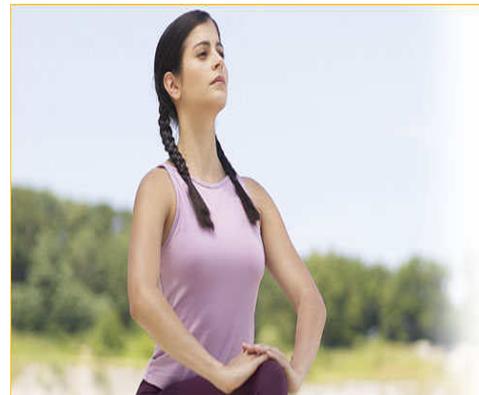
**Use Positive Self Statements:** Identify key words or phrases that you can think of or say under your breath in difficult situations. Say things like: *“Challenge, this is my greatest challenge”* or *“Calm, I am feeling calm”*.

**Learn a Relaxation Exercise:** Try dropping your shoulders, loosening your hands and jaw and taking a few steps back. You might even like to use a relaxation tape or take up Yoga.

**Distract Yourself:** It can be very hard to force yourself not to think about something, so to distract yourself it may be necessary to think about a new thing. You could try carrying a magazine around with you in-case you need to be distracted. If you don't have a magazine try doing mental exercises. Do simple arithmetic in your head, or work your way through the alphabet and try and think of an object which begins with each letter of the alphabet.

Another good technique is to focus on the world around you, try counting the number of bricks in a wall, or the number of red cars on the street. Alternatively focus on other people and try and imagine where they might be going or what their job might be.

Interacting with people can be a great way to distract yourself, just talk about something else and you may find that you become engaged in this new conversation remarkably quickly. If there is no-one around to talk to, then consider phoning a friend.



## **General Tips on Managing Anger**

The following tips are some general things you can change about your lifestyle which can make it easier to cope with anger.

### ***Visualise Coping in Difficult Situations***

Imagine situations you might encounter that would cause you to feel angry. Then imagine how you would cope with these situations without resorting to anger. Rehearse and practice going through these scenarios step by step in your imagination.

### ***Express Feelings Underneath the Anger***

Anger often stems from underlying emotions, such as feeling hurt, rejected or frustrated. Tell a person you're feeling hurt before you actually become angry, or practice saying *"I am feeling angry because..."* and then explain why you are upset.

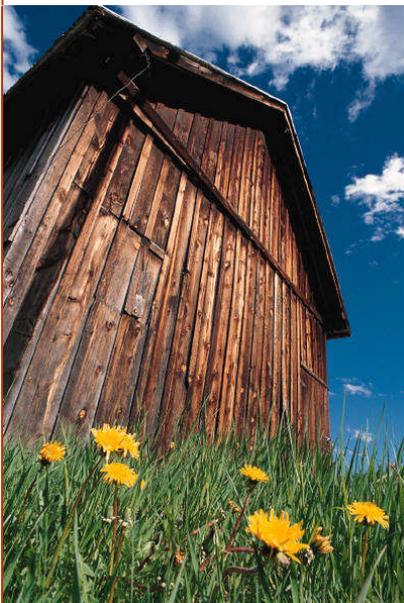
### ***Manage your Stress***

Plan your day well so that you are not overwhelmed or too tired to cope. Leave plenty of room to take breaks throughout the day and avoid high stress situations. It may also help you to get into a set routine. Make sure you take plenty of rest.



### ***Take Regular Exercise***

Exercise will use up excess energy you have during the day. It will also keep you fit and help you to feel good about yourself. Consider taking up activities that are relaxing, such as Yoga.



***Have a Special Place to go to when you're Feeling Frustrated, and make sure you do Leave the Situation to go there when you're becoming Angry.***

A spare bedroom, study, or garden shed can be used as a place to go to if you need to detach yourself from a situation you are finding stressful. If you ever do feel like you are about to 'lose it' and become angry then remove yourself from the situation and go to your special place. Stay there until you have calmed down.



## Medication to Stabilize Mood Following a Brain Injury

You may be prescribed medication following a brain injury for many different reasons, but mood stabilizing drugs are routinely prescribed to patients who have difficulty controlling their emotions following a brain injury.

The most common drug to be prescribed to stabilize mood following a brain injury is *Carbamazepine* (which is sometimes known as *Tegretol*). Carbamazepine is designed to be an anti-epileptic drug (a drug to prevent seizures in epilepsy) but is also effective at stabilizing mood disorders. It can be taken as tablets, liquid or suppositories.

Most people tolerate Carbamazepine well, however a small minority of people may experience some side-effects. The most common side effects are nausea and/or vomiting, problems balancing and double vision.

It is recommended that you seek medical attention immediately if you experience any of the following side-effects when taking Carbamazepine:

- Fever
- Rash
- Mouth ulcers
- Sore Throat
- Bruising
- Bleeding

It is important to bear in mind that all medication has side effects, but that most people can tolerate medications very well. Your doctor should explain to you the possible side effects of any medication they prescribe to you. However if you are worried or confused about the medication you are taking then you should consult your doctor or pharmacist.

If you are taking medication then:

- Never stop taking medication without consulting your doctor
- Always read and follow the instructions that come with medication carefully, and if you are confused then ask your pharmacist for advice
- If your medication makes you feel drowsy then do not drive or operate machinery
- Always consult your doctor if you are pregnant or intending to become pregnant, as some medication requires special monitoring during pregnancy.



## Alcohol and Anger



Alcohol and other drugs affect the nervous system in a way which can impair a person's ability to think clearly and control emotions. Following a brain injury these effects can be even greater, which is why taking alcohol needs to be carefully considered if an individual is having problems managing their anger.

The problem is even more serious for those who used alcohol and other drugs as a method of coping with difficulties before their brain injury. These people may be tempted to return to using alcohol as a way of coping with the stresses that follow a brain injury. This can lead to a vicious cycle of alcohol making the problems worse,

which leads the person to drink even more.

It is important that you spend time recognising any emotional changes after your brain injury before you resort to alcohol. If you do decide to drink, then it is recommended that you only drink a small amount at first, until you become aware of how alcohol now affects you. You may have to re-learn your personal limit as you may become more aggressive after smaller amounts of alcohol than was usual before your injury.

It also may not be a good idea to drink if you are taking prescribed medication following your injury. Alcohol can interact with the drugs you are taking and can either cause larger effects than you would usually expect, or can reduce the effectiveness of the medication. It is important that you know what affects alcohol will have when combined with any medication you are taking.



### **Useful Websites:**

**www.headway.org.uk**

**- A useful web site with much information about brain injury and rehabilitation in the UK.**

**www.birt.co.uk**

**- Another useful web site concerning brain injury, with downloadable leaflets about brain injury and its implications.**

**<http://www.tbiguide.com/angerdepress.html>**

**- A web site with information specifically about anger following a brain injury and tips to help you cope with it**

**[http://www.additionalneeds.net/Anger\\_Management/whyhappens.htm](http://www.additionalneeds.net/Anger_Management/whyhappens.htm)**

**- A web site with very clear examples of situations and feelings that can cause anger.**

