

Returning to Work Following Traumatic Brain Injury

Patient Information Booklet



Talis Consulting Limited

Returning to Work:



Returning to work following a head injury is often seen as a very important goal to work towards. However this may mean that people are over-anxious to return to work and may attempt it too soon after a head injury. These problems can be made worse if you do not have an accurate awareness of your strengths and weaknesses following a head injury.

However if you are realistic about the type of work you can do, and ensure that you return to work in a comfortable and controlled way, then this will make returning to work a goal which is much more likely to be achieved.

Why can a Head Injury Cause Problems when Working?

Returning to work following a head injury can be difficult for a number of reasons. Some of the more common ones are:

Memory Problems: After a head injury you may find that your memory is not as sharp as it once was. This can also make learning new material particularly difficult.

Concentration Problems: You may find that it is now harder to concentrate on one particular thing, or you may find that you are more easily distracted. The problem may also be that you find you get tired more quickly when concentrating on a task.

Executive Functioning Deficits: An 'Executive Function' is usually taken to mean a mental activity which brings together lots of skills. For instance planning, problem solving or multi-tasking all call on executive functions. These executive functions may be impaired following a head injury, which makes complex tasks, or those tasks with many stages, particularly difficult.

Emotional Lability: A head injury can affect the way in which you express emotions. You may find that you experience stronger emotions that you did before your head injury, or you may find that you have less control over your emotions and they 'fly out' before you can stop them. Poor emotional control can have a detrimental affect on your work, especially if others do not understand the nature of your problem.

Insight: Problems with insight mean you do not have an accurate idea of any difficulties you may now have following a head injury. This can make it difficult to adjust to work demands adequately after an injury.

Interpersonal Problems: Some people find it difficult to be as socially competent as they were before their injury. Conversations may seem more difficult now, or you may find yourself getting more irritable. These problems can detrimentally affect your working environment.



Important Considerations Before you Return to Work

Return to Work at the Right Time

There can be a great temptation to return to work too early, especially if returning to work is an important goal for you. The danger of returning to work too early is that failing to cope when you are working can produce feelings of depression and demoralisation. Judging when to return to work can be tricky as a head injury can affect your ability to have an accurate awareness of the severity of your problems. You may need to take the advice of family and friends, and the opinion of a Neurorehabilitation professional.



Start off Small

You will need to be flexible in the amount of work you do so that you are always working within your abilities. Start small when you return to work. You may wish to begin on a part-time basis and slowly increase the demands you place upon yourself.

Look for work with high Structure, Familiarity and Consistency

A job with a high level of structure, familiarity and consistency will place the least demands on processes which are usually impaired following a head injury. This does not mean that you must find a job to do which is boring. The best type of job is one which has a regular routine and taps in to already well-learned skills.

Educate your Employer

Many employers do not understand the nature of a head injury. They may view disability as a purely physical thing and not understand the hidden, long-term side effects of head injury. If this is the case, it is important to provide your employer with information to help them prepare for any difficulties.

Arrange for careful Monitoring and Feedback

It can be difficult for you to know exactly how well you are doing in your job. If this is the case it is important for you to get accurate feedback about how you are doing. Arrange for someone you trust to let you know what progress you are making and what weaknesses you have.

Consider Sheltered or Volunteer Work



If you are having trouble returning to work you might want to consider sheltered employment, where the employer or organisation specifically caters for those with a head injury. You might also want to consider volunteer work. As well as increasing your feelings of well-being and satisfaction, volunteer work can be a great way to experiment with increasing demands upon yourself, and can give a better idea of what you

Helpful Hints to Make Returning to Work Easier

The following tips are some general advice on how to improve your return to work. You may find some, or all, of the following advice helpful. The important consideration is to take the tips which help you and your individual situation.

Use Compensatory Strategies

This means using aids to overcome any tasks you now find difficult. For example use diaries and notebooks if you find it harder to remember things. Or plan your day in the morning if tiredness is a problem.



Break Tasks down into Smaller Chunks

Jobs are far easier to do when they have been broken down into manageable chunks. If there are a number of skills required to complete a job, make a list of all the skills you need to draw on. Understand each skill and the sequence you need to employ them in; then approach jobs with a step-by-step mentality.

Use old Knowledge and Skills as much as possible

Stick to tasks you already know well if you find that learning new skills is now harder after your head injury. If you do find you need new skills, then try to think of a time you overcame a similar problem before, draw on what skills you applied then.



Keep work Part-time and Local if Fatigue is an Issue

If you find that you become fatigued more easily after your head injury then stick to part time work with plenty of scheduled rest. Also consider keeping work local to avoid a long and tiring commute.

Organise Time Effectively

Returning to work can be a stressful time, and the addition of time pressure will not help. Make sure that your day is well organised and you leave enough time to carry out any work you are doing. Tasks may now take a bit longer than they did before your injury.

Don't do too Many Tasks at Once

Doing many jobs at once will increase demands upon yourself hugely. Make sure you do not take on more work than you can handle, and do only one job at a time to begin with.



More Helpful Hints:

Keep Pressure Low

Since your head injury you may be feeling more anxious than you were before. Try to cope with any feelings of anxiety or agitation by remaining calm and seeking help when it's needed.

Get Plenty of Rest

It's important to schedule in regular rest during your working day to stop yourself becoming fatigued and frustrated. It's also important to make sure you get enough rest and relaxation time when you are at home and not working. A good night's sleep will make the next day's work much easier.



Gradually Increase the Complexity of your Work

When you've settled into your work and learned what your strengths and weaknesses are, increase the complexity of the tasks you are doing. To begin with keep tasks simple and straightforward, but as your confidence builds you can gradually increase the complexity of the tasks you do.

Keep Distractions and Interruptions to a Minimum

You may find that it's harder to concentrate and pay attention to what you are doing following your injury. If this is the case, keep distractions and interruptions to a minimum while you are working. This may mean finding a place to work away from the conversations of others, or away from noisy machines or traffic.

Get Support and Notice Progress

Support from colleagues can be very important so you get help when you need it. To those people who matter, briefly explain what has happened to you so they can understand the nature of your problems. If you do have any problems coping, remember that you can contact mental health professionals for support.



Notice Progress

If you gradually increase your workload sensibly you should notice that your confidence increases and your ability at work improves too. These improvements can be gradual, so make sure you take a step back to notice the progress you have made since your head injury.

Think Positively

Thinking positively is vital. It does not mean just thinking you will go back to work, but rather considering and planning all the best options. Consider what you can do, and what you will have difficulty with. Be realistic and consider your abilities in all different aspects of your work. Accept what limitations you may have and plan how you will return to work.

Awareness, Goal Setting and Returning to Work

What is 'Awareness'?

Awareness describes an ability to accurately know what difficulties you have, or may be likely to have, following a head injury. This can be particularly difficult to achieve following your head injury as accurate awareness is a complex task to achieve, for example you need to accurately remember how things were before your injury, and then compare these memories to accurate perceptions of how you are functioning now.



However it's not all bad news: friends, relatives and people you trust can give you accurate feedback as to how you are doing, and one of the good things about gaining accurate awareness into your difficulties is you can monitor your progress easily.

Why can Awareness have an Impact on Returning to Work?

Awareness has a very large influence on returning to work. If you have correct awareness of your difficulties then it can make choosing when to go back to work, choosing what work to go back to, and knowing when to increase demands upon yourself much easier. Awareness also helps during any therapeutic processes as it allows identification of problems to work upon and can motivate you to overcome these problems.

How can I Improve my Awareness?

One way to increase your awareness is to gain feedback from people you trust. Try to 'stand back' and be objective about such feedback and remember that it's designed to help.

There are also exercises that Neurorehabilitation professionals can take you through to help you improve your awareness, such self-evaluation exercises.

Be aware that increasing awareness may take time, and may not be easy. One of the best ways in which awareness is increased is through experience. This means that there may be times where things go wrong, so it is important you consider why certain situations did not turn out the way you wanted them to, and use this experience to better understand your difficulties.

How will Increasing Awareness Help?

It is important that when you do become aware of difficulties you have, you relate these difficulties to day-to-day behaviours. For example if you become aware that you are having difficulty with your memory, then realise this will make activities such as remembering to do daily tasks at work harder. Identification of a specific behaviour which will be impaired then allows you to implement strategies to overcome such difficulties, for example getting a diary and writing in all the tasks you need to do for the days and weeks ahead.

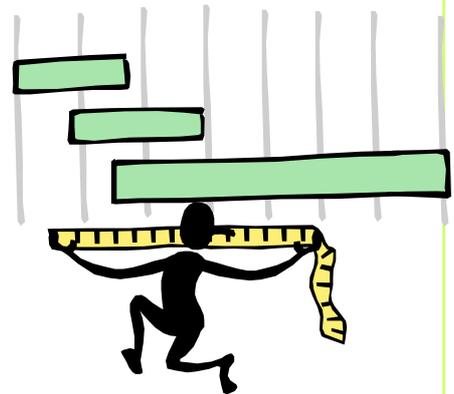
Awareness, Goal Setting and Returning to Work (continued)

How can Awareness Have an Impact on Setting Goals, and why is this Important?

Setting goals is a very important step to returning to work. However without accurate awareness of the difficulties you are now facing, goals you set may be inappropriate or unachievable.

One way in which you can help to make sure goals you set are appropriate is to use the SMART goal-setting system:

- **Specific** - Goals you set should be specific. There's no real point in setting vague goals such as "I want to return to work" without considering the intermediate steps which will help you get there. Specific goals also give you something concrete to work towards and allow you to easily tell when you have completed your goal.
- **Measureable** - It should be possible to measure the progress you make towards achieving your goal, and it should be possible to know when you have achieved your goal. An example might be a goal to work continuously for a certain period of time without becoming fatigued; it should therefore be possible to accurately measure your progress as you slowly increase the time you spend working.
- **Achievable** - The goals you set should be achievable. This has a very large relationship to your levels of awareness. It is crucial you know what your limitations are. If you are in doubt, then seek help from a person you trust, or a Neurorehabilitation professional to give you advice on what is an achievable goal. However goals should not be too achievable, each one should challenge you a little bit. It may be a good idea to start with small, easily achievable goals and gradually increase demands upon yourself.
- **Realistic** - Realistic goals are similar to achievable ones, and therefore also require a good awareness of your difficulties. However realistic goals should be 'workable', they should be goals you can achieve independently. This does not necessarily mean 'by yourself', but rather that if help is needed then you must seek it out. The ability to achieve goals you have set yourself is a very helpful skill when returning to work.
- **Time-Related** - Think of a time by which you would like to have achieved your goal. This will help make your goals both more specific and measureable. It will also help to motivate you to achieve any goals you set.



The SMART targets outlined above will help you to set, and achieve, workable, useful goals. This will also allow you to better plan and implement how you will return to work, and deal with difficulties as they arise during your working day. Remember that the goal setting process does not stop after you leave rehabilitation, it should be something you carry with you and use whenever you need it.

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.

<https://www.braininjurymn.org/library/StrategiesforReturningtoWork.pdf>

- An information leaflet specifically targeted to discuss some of the issues related to returning to work.

