

Post-traumatic growth after brain injury



This publication is part of Headway's *Effects of brain injury* series. To browse through our publications on a range of issues relating to brain injury and download these free-of-charge, visit www.headway.org.uk/information-library.

What is post-traumatic growth?

We often discuss the challenges and hardships of coping with life after brain injury, and this is sadly an all-too-common experience for many brain injury survivors. However, for some, over time there can be a renewed appreciation of life or a desire to do good or kind acts for others. This experience of positive change following a traumatic period is known as post-traumatic growth (PTG).

Other examples of experiences associated with PTG are...

- changed priorities
- an increased sense of personal strength
- an awakened or renewed sense of spirituality
- more meaningful personal relationships
- spending more time with family and friends
- changing career path
- development of new hobbies/ interests
- an increased appreciation of nature

PTG is not limited to brain injury survivors' experiences; people who have suffered trauma from other means can experience it as well. Nor does the positivity of PTG completely replace feelings such as loss, anger, anxiety and depression so common to survivors; these are still very normal feelings to have at any stage of brain injury, even alongside experiences of PTG.

Why do some people experience PTG after brain injury?

There are several reasons why someone may experience PTG after brain injury. On the following page are some of the suggested reasons...

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Recognition of what *could* have been

While experiencing a brain injury can undoubtedly be an incredibly difficult thing, for some people there is a renewed appreciation of their life and a recognition of what could have been if, for example, they were not diagnosed quickly enough or not rushed to hospital in time following their injury. People may recognise how important the time they have with family and friends is after going through a traumatic event, which can give a deeper significance to these relationships and future opportunities.

Determination to overcome impairment

Some people may feel that they do not want the injury and the impact of it to hold them back from what they could achieve, giving them a greater sense of determination to achieve their goals, or set new goals for themselves. In fact, some research suggests that a higher level of impairment following brain injury is more likely to trigger PTG, as there may be more determination from the survivor to overcome their impairment.

Break in usual routine

It has also been suggested that for some people, the break in their usual routine offers more time to reflect on what is important to them and offers an opportunity to change their direction in life. Someone working in a regular 9am-5pm job before their injury may no longer be able to work the same hours afterwards, but find that this gives them more time to pursue hobbies they have been wanting to do for a while but never had the time to explore before their injury.

Supporting others

It may be that some people, having gone through the trauma of brain injury, feel a deep and personal desire to support others who have gone through similar hardships. They may want to use their experiences to benefit others, so that others who are new to brain injury do not have to feel so confused or alone with their experiences.

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Reassessing and rebuilding

For some, the traumatic event may have completely changed their world and outlook on life, and through PTG they reassess and rebuild what is important to them.

Feeling positive after brain injury

Remember that there is no right or wrong way to feel after brain injury, and no survivor should ever be made to feel like they have to feel positive. It is perfectly normal to feel grief and a sense of loss after brain injury. Furthermore, everyone's experiences will be different, and may vary over time.

However, research points towards a few suggestions that can help with developing a positive approach after brain injury...

- **Set realistic goals for yourself** that are achievable - this may mean breaking larger goals into smaller tasks, asking for help, or trying something new to accommodate for your needs.
- **Visit our [Brain injury and me](#) website** to read personal stories from other brain injury survivors on living life after brain injury
- **Explore your options** of returning to work or consider volunteering opportunities. Our publications [Returning to work after brain injury](#) and [Voluntary work after brain injury](#) offer advice on these topics.
- **Consider what your values are.** Research indicates that a concept called values-based living is associated with PTG. It involves recognising what matters most to you in life and making commitments to focus on these. For guidance on practicing values-based living and an activity to help with this, turn to page 5.

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- **Identify a new hobby or skill.** Many people develop new interests after their brain injury and the possibilities are endless! There are plenty of ideas online and in books/ magazines of activities you could try, and many activities have been adapted for people with disabilities.
- **Get support** from a relevant professional to cope with the emotional impact of brain injury, such as a clinical neuropsychologist or counsellor specialising in brain injury.

Other professionals can help with coping with the effects of brain injury - for example, an occupational therapist can help you to identify suitable adaptive equipment or tools that might make your life easier and encourage feeling more positive about the future. Or a speech and language therapist can help with communication issues that may be affecting your relationships with others.

Speak to your GP or neurologist in the first instance about getting support for the effects of brain injury.

If you are struggling to cope with your feelings after brain injury, you can also contact our nurse-led helpline. The helpline can provide you with information, advice or a listening ear if you just want to talk to someone about how you are feeling. Details of our helpline are available below.

You can also explore our online communities to connect with others affected by brain injury. For more information, visit www.headway.org.uk/supporting-you/online-communities.

Above all, try not to lose hope - there can be life after brain injury. For many, the first few months and years are the hardest to adjust to, but remember that support is available and time can be a healer. Identifying things that are important to you and that give your life meaning can help with feelings of positivity, even after trauma.

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Finally, please remember that you can contact our helpline on 0808 800 2244 or helpline@headway.org.uk for information and support, or contact your local Headway group or branch for local support.

Values-based living activity

What are values?

Values are things that direct how we want to behave as human beings. They are the things that we personally hold most important to ourselves, and help us to decide how we treat ourselves, others and the world around us.

People's values differ depending on what is most important to them in life. Being able to identify what your personal values are can help to recognise what gives your life meaning and importance. You can then identify ways to support your values to help you feel fulfilled - this is what we mean by values-based living.

The below activity helps you to identify what your values are and might help with the process of readjustment after brain injury and post-traumatic growth. You might find it helpful to go through this exercise with a professional such as a clinical neuropsychologist or clinical psychologist, or with someone you trust such as a family member or close friend. Remember though, your values are personal to you, and therefore you are the person best placed to complete this activity.

Steps for values-based living activity

1. Look through the list of values on page 7
2. Identify three values that are the most important to you
3. For each value, think of one action you could take to support this value

For example...

A value that is important to me is.... *Assertiveness*

To support this value I can... *Talk to my manager about flexible working hours to help with managing my fatigue after brain injury... apply for welfare benefits*

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that I am entitled to ... and ask to be seated at a quiet table in a cafe to avoid becoming overstimulated from noise, so that I can socialise with my friends over coffee.

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There are hundreds of different values. Here is a list of some common ones. Some of these might be easier to practice than others, depending on the nature of your brain injury. Keep in mind there are no such things as 'right values' or 'wrong values', and your values might change over time.

Acceptance: to be open to and accepting of myself, others, life etc

Assertiveness: to respectfully stand up for my rights and request what I want

Authenticity: to be authentic, genuine, real; to be true to myself

Beauty: to appreciate, create, or cultivate beauty in myself, others, the environment etc

Caring: to be caring towards myself, others, the environment etc

Challenge: to keep challenging myself to grow, learn, improve

Contribution: to contribute, help, assist, or make a positive difference to myself or others

Courage: to be courageous or brave; to persist in the face of fear, threat, or difficulty

Creativity: to be creative or innovative

Friendliness: to be friendly, companionable, or agreeable towards others

(...list continued onto next page)

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Forgiveness: to be forgiving towards myself or others

Humour: to see and appreciate the humorous side of life

Intimacy: to open up, reveal, and share myself - emotionally or physically – in my close personal relationships

Kindness: to be kind, compassionate, considerate, nurturing or caring towards myself or others

Love: to act lovingly or affectionately towards myself or others

Mindfulness: to be conscious of, open to, and curious about my here-and-now experience

Open-mindedness: to think things through, see things from other's points of view, and weigh evidence fairly.

Patience: to wait calmly for what I want

Responsibility: to be responsible and accountable for my actions

Self-awareness: to be aware of my own thoughts, feelings and actions

Self-care: to look after my health and wellbeing, and get my needs met

Self-development: to keep growing, advancing or improving in knowledge, skills, character, or life experience.

Sensuality: to create, explore and enjoy experiences that stimulate the five senses

Spirituality: to connect with things bigger than myself

Skilfulness: to continually practice and improve my skills, and apply myself fully when using them

Trust: to be trustworthy; to be loyal, faithful, sincere, and reliable

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