

Overcoming
Loneliness and
Building Lasting
Relationships
after Brain Injury

Living with Brain Injury



Brain Injury Association
of America

The logo for the Brain Injury Association of America, featuring a stylized, intertwined graphic of three loops.

This brochure was developed for persons with brain injury, family members, caregivers, and friends to suggest ways to deal with the problems one may face when living with brain injury.

**Overcoming Loneliness
and Building Lasting Relationships
after Brain Injury**

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COMMON SIGNS OF LONELINESS

Loss of good relationships with friends, family members, and co-workers may be one of the greatest difficulties after brain injury. Many survivors describe feeling lonely, isolated, and misunderstood. Best friends may disappear and family members may seem distant or unhelpful.

No doubt, brain injury causes medical and physical problems. Having a brain injury can also change the way you think, feel, and act toward others. Understanding how brain injury has affected the way you feel and act is an important first step. Then you can learn how to improve old relationships, develop new relationships, and feel better about life.

Have you found yourself saying...

- ♦ “What happened to the friends who came to visit me in the hospital?”
- ♦ “Nobody cares about me.”
- ♦ “People seem to avoid me.”
- ♦ “My wife threatens to leave me at least twice a week.”

“Nobody has any idea what I’m going through.”

- ♦ “Seems like everyone at work has lost my home phone number.”
- ♦ “I wonder why my boyfriend won’t return my calls.”
- ♦ “I can’t relate to other people. It’s easier to be by myself.”
- ♦ “Seems like nobody wants to talk to me.”



How are you treating other people?

You may be thinking a lot about how others treat you. You may have noticed that friends, family members, and co-workers are treating you differently. Just as important is thinking about how you treat other people. Keep in mind that relationships are a two-way street. The way you act toward other people affects how they treat you. Think about how you've been acting.



Are you saying or doing things that cause other people to be uncomfortable? Are you pushing others away by...

- ♦ focusing on what's wrong with your life and the world?
- ♦ not listening when others speak, interrupting, or talking too much?
- ♦ not thinking about other people's needs or feelings?
- ♦ arguing or disagreeing?
- ♦ talking only about yourself?
- ♦ asking people very personal questions?
- ♦ talking mostly about your brain injury and how your life has changed for the worse?
- ♦ repeatedly rejecting others' advice, suggestions, or offers of help?
- ♦ touching people without asking if it's okay or standing too near them?
- ♦ not taking care of your appearance?
- ♦ saying things that hurt other people's feelings?

COMMON FEELINGS AFTER BRAIN INJURY

Why is it that many survivors feel lonely, even when around family members and friends?

Loneliness is a normal experience for most people from time to time in their life. It's a feeling of being disconnected, that something is missing in their lives. After a brain injury, loneliness can seem more difficult to deal with because of the changes that often result. Understanding how brain injury has affected the way you feel and act is an important first step.

The following are common feelings expressed by people with brain injury...

♦ **Difficulty communicating or relating to others**

After injury, some survivors have trouble talking to other people or understanding what others are saying.

♦ **Fear of being hurt or rejected by others**

Many survivors describe feeling nervous about being around other people.

♦ **Irritability or feelings of frustration**

Friends and family may feel uncomfortable because they don't know what to say or how to help.

♦ **Fatigue and loss of energy are common after injury.**

Many survivors find they don't have the energy to do things they used to enjoy or to spend time with friends and family.

♦ **Worry about being different or less capable than others**

These feelings often make it difficult to be around other people or to seek out new relationships.

♦ **Frustration with inability to drive or work after their injury**

Lack of transportation and less money makes it hard to pay for activities.

In addition to these feelings, some survivors find that they lose contact with their friends and co-workers because they don't see them as much, especially if they have not returned to work or to school.

WAYS TO OVERCOME LONELINESS

Here are some simple steps and actions you can take to overcome loneliness.

♦ Identify and develop interests and hobbies that you can do by yourself.

Plan to spend time alone doing things that you enjoy such as drawing, crafts, gardening, crossword puzzles, reading, listening to music, tracing your family tree, keeping a journal or thousands of other activities. You'll be a more interesting person and have more positive things to talk about with others.

♦ Exercise.

Exercise will increase your energy and help you to feel better about yourself. You can also meet people by joining a gym, health club, the YMCA or YWCA, a mall walkers program, or other physical activity.

♦ Limit television.

Limit the amount of time you spend watching television or playing video games by yourself.

♦ Greet people with a friendly smile.

A smile and direct eye contact makes you seem more friendly and confident. Approach people instead of expecting them to approach you.

♦ Eat a healthy diet and limit or eliminate alcohol.

A healthy diet gives your body the energy it needs and can effect how you feel. Alcohol depresses your mood and can magnify behaviors that make it difficult for others to be around you.

♦ Follow the medication schedule that your doctor prescribes.

If you don't like the way the medication makes you feel, talk with your doctor about making changes. Just stopping medication can cause physical problems, as well as, bring changes in behavior and personality.



♦ **Try not to be overcome by your problems or the challenges you face.**

Look for the good in yourself. If you are feeling overwhelmed or depressed, your physician or community mental health program can help connect you with the professional counseling and support services you may need.

For more information on services in your area, contact your state mental health agency. To locate a psychologist in your area, go to www.apa.org or call the American Psychological Association toll-free at (800) 964-2000. For a licensed clinical social worker in your area, go to www.naswdc.org. For a psychiatrist, go to www.psych.org or contact your doctor.

♦ **Offer to help and do things for other people without expecting something in return.**

Everyone does better with understanding and support from others. Help someone carry their groceries, walk their dog, or bring in the mail. Ask others for more ideas about how you can be helpful. Helping, caring for, and reaching out to other people are good ways to show others that you are the kind of person they want to be around.

♦ **Ask others for help when you need or want it.**

Asking others for help means that they don't have to guess what you need. It can help them feel more comfortable and you'll feel better knowing that you have taken control of getting your needs met.

Most people are understanding and want to help, but many don't know how to help. For example, when traveling by car, ask a close family member or friend to drive or take turns driving.

♦ **To meet more new people, you must be around people.**

Since you won't become friends with or want to date every person you meet, you'll need to meet a lot of people to find even one good friend. Don't limit yourself to one idea or way to meet people.

♦ **Keep an open mind.**

Think about places where you have met people or made friends in the past. Check your local newspaper for free or low cost community events and support groups. Make a commitment to go to at least one of these new activities each week. While it may be hard to go the first time, keep in mind that it's hard for most people to try new things and that most of the time, you'll be glad you went.

Some places you may meet people are:

- Support groups (look in your local paper or contact the Brain Injury Association of America for information at (800) 444-6443 or www.biausa.org.)
- Community events, such as theatrical and music productions (many communities have local theatre and choral groups and many high schools and colleges put on plays and concerts)
- Art shows, museums and galleries
- Book clubs, book signings and poetry readings at bookstores and libraries
- Sports events (consider community recreational leagues through your local parks and recreation department, as well as, college and professional sports)
- Political meetings
- Independent Living Centers
- Classes at an adult education program or community college
- Civic groups, such as Rotary International (www.rotary.org), Lions Clubs International (www.lionsclubs.org) or Kiwanis International (www.kiwanis.org)
- Community organizations such as soup kitchens, food pantries, day care centers, hospitals and nursing homes, schools and animal shelters often need volunteers

♦ **Make a list of things you enjoy doing or would like to do.**

While the list might start out short, keep adding to it. Hang it on your refrigerator or another visible place where it can act as a reminder when you are having trouble thinking of something to do. When you are feeling lonely, try to do something that's on the list.

♦ **Consider adopting a pet.**

There are many pets out there without anyone to take care of them. You may be able to offer a pet a loving home and find yourself with a grateful companion in return. For more information about what is needed to adopt a pet, contact your local Humane Society (www.hsus.org or (202) 452 1100) or the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (www.asPCA.org or (212) 876-7700).

♦ **Write, call, or e-mail your family and friends.**

Talk to and spend time with people who care about you. Call or write someone even if you're just saying "hi." Plan to keep in touch once every week or two, even if they don't answer you every time.

♦ **Do volunteer work.**

Religious groups, schools, hospitals, and libraries often need volunteer workers. By helping others, you are likely to meet other people with similar interests. Many local newspapers publish a list of volunteer opportunities and many websites list opportunities (for example check out:

www.volunteermatch.org and www.idealists.org).



♦ **Become involved in community and faith-related activities.**

You stand a good chance of meeting people with similar interests in your community or at your house of worship.

♦ **Learn about brain injury, community resources, and recovery. Get involved.**

Contact the Brain Injury Association of America (www.biausa.org or (800) 444-6443) to find out about support groups, how you can get involved, and about other resources in your area.

♦ **Limit the time you spend on the Internet, in chat rooms and other online connections.**

Some people use the Internet as a way to reduce loneliness. Others use chat groups and other online connections to make friends. There are a lot of groups online, but these “virtual” connections lack an important part of friendship – live interaction with another person. And sometimes, people are not who they say they are. Be careful about giving out personal information, such as your address.

TAKE ACTION TO BUILD LASTING RELATIONSHIPS

♦ **Learn to like yourself.**

If you don't like yourself, it will be difficult for you to reach out to people who may become friends. Positive thinking won't necessarily find you friends, but negative thinking will definitely prevent you from making and keeping friends. Focus on what you can and like to do. Celebrate your accomplishments.

♦ **Believe that others will like you... and they most likely will.**

When you have a positive attitude about yourself, other people will notice it.

♦ **Write down a goal about making and keeping friends.**

Post it in a place where you will see it and remember to work on it.

♦ **Make an effort to make new friends.**

That can take energy, and sometimes, even courage. Take the initiative to ask the other person to share a fun activity with you, like going to a movie, watching a video, taking a walk, going window shopping or to a sports event. Look for someone who shares an interest with you. And, if it doesn't work out at first, keep trying. You won't meet people and have the possibility of making friends if you give up.

♦ **Take care of your physical appearance.**

It is very common for people who become discouraged about themselves and their lives to reduce the attention they pay to personal care. No matter how you feel, be sure to clean your clothes, brush your teeth, and comb your hair. People will have a better view of you and you will feel better about yourself if you take good care of your appearance.



♦ **Build a friendship slowly.**

Good friends are hard to find. Don't expect too much, too fast - you don't want to overwhelm or scare a person off.

♦ **Reduce the amount of talking you do.**

You can't be a good listener when you are talking. Listening is your most important communication skill.

♦ **Ask questions.**

Questions help you understand what the speaker is saying and let the speaker know that you are listening and interested. Ask others about their lives, interests, and well-being and listen carefully to what they say.

♦ **Show the speaker that you are interested.**

Look at them, nod your head and smile or say "Uh huh" or "I see" from time to time. Ask questions about things the other person is talking about or is interested in.

♦ **Remove distractions.**

If you have difficulty paying attention, turn off the television or radio when having a conversation or ask the other person to do so.

♦ **Be a good friend, the kind of person that others like to be around.**

Accept others for who they are. Be honest and dependable. Respect the other person's feelings, even if you don't feel they are respecting yours.

♦ **Communicate in positive and helpful ways.**

Some survivors of brain injury are quick to share negative thoughts and feelings with others. Make a point to focus on and tell others about the good things in your life or the world around you.

♦ **Be aware that relationships have ups and downs.**

Nearly every person, with or without a brain injury, has experienced relationship troubles in their life. There will be good times and not so good times in most relationships. Be patient and look forward to the good times.

♦ **Fight fair.**

Conflict in a relationship is normal. Handled well, it can help you and the other person grow together. When you have a disagreement, be specific about the issue and address it when it happens. Tell the other person how you feel. Don't blame the other person. Ask for information so you can better understand why he or she did something. Be quick to forgive and give you and the person a better chance to build a strong relationship.

♦ **Be polite, kind, and considerate.**

Encourage the quality of your relationships to grow. Show you care and that you are concerned about others. Before you do things, think about how others will be affected by what you do. Try to do more things that will help other people feel good about you and themselves.

♦ **Try to think of others at least as much as you think about yourself.**

After brain injury, you may feel overwhelmed by the changes in yourself and your life. You might have trouble not thinking about your injury and the challenges you face. Thinking about others is really a skill. The more you practice, the better you get.

Make a note of birthdays or other special days in your family and friend's lives, set a reminder a few days early and send a card or give the person a call. Free electronic cards are available on many websites including www.hallmark.com or www.americangreetings.com.

♦ **Think before you speak.**

Think carefully about what you want to say and how others might react. Try to say things in a way that brings a positive reaction. Sometimes it helps to write down what you want to say.

♦ **Be prepared to work at building relationships.**

Relationships don't just happen. They take time and effort. And, don't give up too soon on a new relationship. Give it time. Accept that it may not have the same priority for the other person that it does at this moment for you.

To help you get started in building better relationships – Try to do at least one good thing for someone else every single day.

Overcoming Loneliness and Building Lasting Relationships after Brain Injury is one in a series of brochures on "Living with Brain Injury."



Overcoming Loneliness



Preparing for Life after High School



A Basic Legal Glossary



Employment



Substance Abuse



Depression

To order any of these booklets, please contact the Brain Injury Association of America at

**1.800.444.6443 or
www.biausa.org**