

Returning to work

or other activities



IN THIS BOOKLET:

- Effects of a brain injury on working
- When to go back to work
- Key steps to take
- Advice for you and your employer
- Options apart from work
- Information and support

Brain Injury Series

This booklet was written for, and with, people with an Acquired Brain Injury. An Acquired Brain Injury is an injury to someone's brain that happens during their lifetime. It can be caused by a stroke, an infection, lack of oxygen, surgery or a head injury, for example.

Note: throughout this booklet, we use the phrase 'brain injury' to refer to an Acquired Brain Injury.

Visit www.headway.ie/information:

- To read or download copies of other booklets in this Brain Injury Series.
- To print the booklets and other resources, including Large Print versions.
- To request hard copies of the booklets.
- To see the booklet contributors and the sources we used.

Our sincere thanks to all those who contributed.

Please note: we have done our best to provide information that is correct and up-to-date. However, we cannot be responsible for any errors or omissions. Everyone's brain injury affects them differently. You should not consider the information in this booklet as a substitute for getting advice from a doctor or other professional.

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Introduction

“I don’t feel that things are collapsing because I’m not working. I’m just trying to say to myself: it’s important to be engaged in the community. It’s important to be out and about.”

John, Co Dublin

The number one goal for many people after their brain injury is to get back to work. This is not surprising when work can be such a significant part of your life and your identity. Striving to recover enough to get back to work can be hugely motivating.

For many people, it is a journey that requires a lot of time and effort and getting the right support. This booklet is designed to assist you on your journey. We hope that it will help you find a path that leads to the right destination for you – whether that destination is paid employment, volunteering, community involvement, a course or some other activity that you find meets your needs.

“I think doing voluntary work is great. It gives you the chance to interact with people, to socialise and be in a managed structure but not be under the same pressure as being in a paid job.”

Louise, Tipperary

How brain injury may affect returning to work

Research, and peoples' own experience, tell us that there are many factors that delay, or even prevent, people from returning to work. The impact of these factors varies greatly from person to person. Each person's brain injury is unique so how it impacts on them and their return to work or other activities, is also an individual journey.

A brain injury can cause many obvious physical and sensory difficulties – for example, paralysis, sight or hearing impairments or difficulties with movement, balance or coordination. However, many people have difficulties that are not obvious – these are known as 'hidden disabilities'. These difficulties can have a significant impact on going back to work.

Some hidden disabilities after a brain injury are:

- Fatigue.
- Changes in your ability to read, write, speak or understand language.
- Memory difficulties – for example, forgetting appointments, conversations or recent events.
- Reduced ability to take in and process information quickly.
- Attention and concentration difficulties.
- Reduced ability to plan and organise yourself or tasks.

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- Difficulty thinking flexibly to solve problems.
 - Trouble managing your emotions.
 - Reduced tolerance of distractions, noise, bright lights or changes in temperature.
 - A decrease in self-awareness.

Other common changes are:

- A drop in self-confidence.
- Changes in how you interact with other people.
- Loss of ability to drive.



You can get useful tips and advice on living with hidden difficulties from our other booklets in this **Brain injury series** (see page 21 for details). See also the **What you can do** section on page 15.

“They see you and you look perfect. But, as I say to them: ‘Come on inside my head and try looking out. Then you’ll know all about it.’”

Anne, Dublin

When can I go back to work or similar activities?

Even though you may want to go back to work as soon as possible, it is important that you take your time and wait until you are ready. If you are able to return to work, choosing the right time can increase your chance of success. The 'right' time for you is when you have made enough progress in your physical and cognitive recovery and you are adjusting well psychologically to any lasting effects from your brain injury.

How will I know if I am ready?

1. The first thing to do is to check with your GP to see if they agree that you have recovered enough to go back to work. You might feel fine, but the medical advice may be that you need more time.
2. If you get the go-ahead from your GP, then contact your employer.



If you, or your partner, are on a Social Welfare payment, it is very important to get correct information and advice **now** about what your options are for returning to work or other routes such as training. Contact Citizens Information on 0761 074 000 for confidential advice and assistance or visit www.citizensinformation.ie. See pages 11-12 for more on Social Welfare payments.

Now try this Check-list. Answering ‘Yes’ to most of the areas below, will give you a broad indication that you are ready to consider going back to work. You might like to ask someone you trust to fill in a copy also.

Checklist for readiness for work

	Yes
Independent in activities of daily living, such as cooking, cleaning, showering and shopping (or have a long-term Personal Assistant).	
Have consistent energy levels and sleep routine.	
Have returned to other non-work activities such as socialising, hobbies and managing household bills.	
Can drive or use public transport.	
Can retain new information or have a way you note it consistently.	
Are successfully using strategies or aids if you have any difficulties with skills such as memory, organising or communication.	

Comparing what you and they write down might highlight areas where you are overestimating or underestimating how ready for work you are. For any areas you mark 'No', note what action you plan to take. We give many suggestions in this booklet. Consider seeking additional professional input and/or giving yourself more time for recovery.

No	What I can do	✓

How do I go back to work?

First try to develop a clear understanding of your strengths, challenges and any limitations.

A limitation is something that you cannot overcome through further rehabilitation or effort – for example, not being able to drive due to having epilepsy. Dealing with limitations involves looking at other options to get around them – for example, using public transport in this case.

 See pages 21–24 for contact information for all of the following:

Physical abilities and fatigue

If you have difficulties with movement, strength, coordination or balance, a Physiotherapist or Occupational Therapist, may be able to assist you to achieve further improvements.

Fatigue is common after a brain injury. Try the tips in Headway's booklet on **Fatigue and sleep**. Contact your GP if you do not experience any improvement.

Sensory difficulties – like sight, hearing or touch

If you have difficulties in any of these areas that need further treatment or input, talk to your GP. You can also contact relevant organisations – for example, NCBI (National Council for the Blind Ireland) provide services to assist people with changes in their vision to maximise their independence at home or at work (see page 21 for contact details).

Cognitive and perceptual skills

A Clinical Psychologist or Occupational Therapist can work with you to maximise your potential in skills such as problem solving, multi-tasking, planning, concentration, organising, spatial awareness and memory. They can also assess these skills and make recommendations.

- A **Neuropsychological Assessment** measures your current level of brain functioning, identifies how this is impacting on you and makes helpful recommendations (see more on page 9).
- A **Vocational Assessment** by an Occupational Therapist provides you with practical information on your strengths and challenges in relation to skills needed for work. This assessment also includes recommendations for aids and strategies (see more on page 9).

Communication skills

If you have communication difficulties that you want further skills or strategies to deal with, contact a Speech and Language Therapist (see page 22).

Social skills and community involvement

Your local community centre, library, sports centre or brain injury organisation are all good places to meet people and get involved (see page 24 for other ideas).

Coming to terms with changes

Many people find counselling or psychotherapy helps them to come to terms with changes after their brain injury (see page 23 for contact details).

Setting realistic goals

The ability to set yourself realistic goals and to get on with other people are two very important skills that increase the chances of successfully returning to work.

After a brain injury, some people may overestimate what they are capable of - for example, someone's short-term memory may be worse than they realise. They may not be fully aware that how they interact with other people has changed - perhaps they have an abrupt way of speaking that they do not notice themselves.

If you (or someone close to you) set unrealistic goals, this can put you under unhelpful pressure and actually reduce your chances of success.

- You need to give yourself enough time after your injury to recover. Many people go back to work too soon and cannot meet the demands placed on them.
- You also need involvement with other people, to have a chance to see how you get on with them in different social situations.
- A **Neuropsychological Assessment** or **Vocational Assessment** may give you valuable feedback on any current limitations you have and on your strengths. You can use this feedback to help you set realistic goals and to guide you on what to do next. Contact a Psychologist or Occupational Therapist for advice (see pages 8, 22 and 23).

“I genuinely thought when I got out of hospital I’d be back doing exactly the same role within a couple of months. I’m so happy I didn’t and that I got good advice. In the end, it took me two years to get back.”

Ronan, Co Dublin

Services that can help

Given the proven benefits of the support of specialist services, it makes sense to link in to one of these services as soon as you feel well enough. They can assist you to look at your strengths and any limitations, to set realistic goals, to weigh up if you are ready for work, what steps you could take to get ready or to explore other options apart from work.

1. Organisations such as **Headway**, the **National Learning Network**, the **Irish Wheelchair Association** and the **National Rehabilitation Hospital** in Dun Laoghaire, offer services to people wishing to return to work after a brain injury. See pages 21–24 for their contact details.
2. **Rehabilitative Training**. The HSE has staff to support people who are under 65 years of age to explore options for training and re-building confidence after an illness or disability. Use the **HSE information line** to make contact with the **HSE Occupational Guidance Officer**, the **HSE Disability Manager** or the **HSE Disability Case Manager** in your area (HSE t: 1850 24 1850).

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3. **Employability** is a nationwide service that supports people with a disability or illness to access work, where possible (see page 23 for contact details).
 4. **Local Employment Services Networks** offer information, guidance and job-searching support as well as training and educational opportunities in many counties (see page 23 for contact details).
 5. **Adult Education Guidance Services** are available through your local **Education Training Board** (formerly the VEC) (see page 24 for contact details).
 6. If you are **studying**, or wish to return to study, contact the college **Access Officer** for advice or additional support.
 7. Contact **www.ahead.ie** for free advice and information for Third Level students with disabilities and work opportunities for graduates.

Payments and grants

If you have an Income Protection Plan, Life Assurance or Health Insurance, check if you're due any payments while you are not working.

Social Welfare Payments

If you are receiving **Disability Allowance** you can apply for an exemption to take up **Rehabilitative Employment** (subject to certain conditions). This is done in conjunction with your employer and your GP.

If you are receiving **Illness Benefit** or are on an **Invalidity Pension** and wish to return to work, you can apply for **Partial Capacity Benefit**. Partial Capacity

Benefit allows someone to work while keeping some social welfare benefits (subject to certain conditions).



If you are finding figuring out Social Welfare payments a bit daunting – remember, there is help available. Contact the Access Officer in your local Social Welfare Office or contact Citizens Information to find out what effect returning to work would have on any entitlements (see page 21 for contact details). Entitlements that may be affected by a return to work include the Carers Allowance, the Free Travel Pass and the Medical Card.

Grants for returning to work

There are a number of government grants available to employees with disabilities, injuries or medical conditions- for example, the **Workplace Equipment Adaptation Grant** is available to make changes to the workplace or to get adaptive equipment.

An employer, employee or a **Self-employed person** can apply.



To find out about any available grants and how to apply, visit: www.citizensinformation.ie, your local Citizens Information Centre or phone 0761 074 000.

Adjustments at work

(Reasonable accommodations)

- **Reasonable accommodations** are adjustments to working arrangements, equipment or facilities to accommodate someone's disability, injury or medical condition.
- They are put in place to help an employee to do the job they were employed to do. Without such adjustments an employee could be limited by the effects of their disability.
- An employer has a responsibility to provide reasonable accommodations unless doing so would cause undue hardship to the employer or would create a significant risk to the safety of the employee or other workers.
- For practical examples of reasonable accommodations, see pages 14 and 15.



Should I tell my employer if I have any difficulties due to my brain injury?

Only you can decide whether to disclose any relevant difficulties or disabilities following your brain injury to your employer. However, it is important to bear in mind that letting your employer know, may allow you to receive supports and adjustments (Reasonable accommodations) to assist you to do your work on an equal footing with your colleagues. See www.citizensinformation.ie, www.ahead.ie or www.edi.ie for more on reasonable accommodations and disclosing disabilities.

At Work

What your employer can do

- Discuss a flexible plan with you for returning to work.
- Ask you what helps you to work around any effects from your brain injury that may impact on your job.
- Give you a reduced workload to start off with.
- Re-structure work times and responsibilities to give you as much routine and predictability as possible.
- Support you to use the recommendations from any Neuropsychological Assessments or Vocational Assessments you've had done (see pages 8, 9, 23).
- Arrange for you to liaise with HR, your Employee Assistance Programme or a specialist vocational service, where available and as needed.
- Assign a trusted colleague or workplace mentor to give you daily guidance or re-training, as needed.
- Arrange regular, honest and constructive feedback sessions. These can assist you to adjust how you're working, if needed, and provide encouragement.
- Take in to account that fatigue, irritability and changes in emotions are common after brain injury.
- Visit www.edi.ie (Employer Disability Information) and/or www.Headway.ie for information and advice.

What you can do

- If you have decided to disclose any difficulties, tell your employer any specific effects of your brain injury that may affect your work and what can help.
- Agree together what adjustments are feasible to your role, work hours and/or work station, for example.
- Arrange regular meetings with your manager to keep them in touch regarding how you are getting on.
- If you feel comfortable, ask for your colleagues to have a brain injury awareness session. This may help them understand better the effects of a brain injury. This is particularly beneficial if you 'look great' but have difficulties that are not immediately obvious such as memory, fatigue, difficulty controlling emotions or speaking your mind more than before.

Tips that may help

- Reduce distractions by decluttering your work area and cutting out background noise and movement in the background if possible.
- For memory difficulties, try using a diary (Headway produce one) and a calendar, as well as reminders, notes or voice memos on your mobile phone or computer.
- Use checklists for tasks and finish them one at a time.
- Do more tiring tasks first and take regular breaks.
- Try out the tips in Headway's other booklets such as **Planning and Organising** and **Fatigue**, for example.



Get advice and support

Many people find that being ill and away from work for a while affects their confidence.

You may find trying to get back to work or other activities more challenging than you thought it would be. It is best to get as much support as you can along the way. Let family and friends know how you are getting on and ask for their support and feedback.

Try not to think of looking for support as a sign of weakness. In fact, research shows that people who identify they need support and get it, increase their chances of successfully returning to work if they are able.

“Coming to the Headway group is brilliant. You’re with people you feel at home with. When you mention your brain injury, they know exactly what you’re talking about.”

Chris, Co Limerick



Key steps to take

- First check with your GP or consultant, that you have recovered well enough to go back to work. ☐
- Don't go back to work before you are ready. Many people underestimate the full impact their brain injury may have on working - for example, experiencing fatigue or difficulties concentrating or multi-tasking. ☐
- If you realise that you are not as well physically, cognitively or psychologically as you'd like, try to get professional input before attempting a return to work. ☐
- Contact an organisation like Headway to get advice, support or services to assist you to identify goals around returning to work. ☐
- Set yourself some realistic goals (like community involvement, volunteering, regular activities or getting up early in the morning). Check can you meet these goals. ☐
- Find out how returning to work will impact on any Social Welfare payments and entitlements. Contact your local Social Welfare Office, Citizens Information or your Employee Assistance Programme, if you have one. ☐

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- Contact your employer to discuss options for a gradual return to work. Avoid going straight back to full-time hours. ☐
 - If you decide to disclose the effects of your brain injury to your employer, give them:
(a) information about brain injury and
(b) what adjustments would help minimise any effects on you at work. ☐
 - Use any strategies you have to make work go as smoothly as possible. ☐
 - Meet regularly with your manager to talk about what is going well or not so well. ☐
 - If returning to working is not possible, give yourself a goal of trying activities that will give you the social interaction, satisfaction and routine that you want. ☐

“I think the biggest thing is not to be afraid of making mistakes. Everyone makes them – whether they are a CEO or someone starting their first job. We only get better at things because of mistakes. Don’t be hard on yourself. Remember, nobody is perfect.”

Conor, Co Louth

What if I do not go back to work?

Returning to paid work after a brain injury can be a complex process and may take months or even years. Going back to work is not possible for everyone. If you are not working now or have been told that you will not be able to go back to a paid job, it may be hard to accept. It can take some time to come to terms with this new reality.

Here are some suggestions for things to consider. Research has found that doing activities such as the ones listed below, gives people many of the same benefits as when they were in employment.

- It is important to remember that returning to work is not the only mark of success in recovering from a brain injury.
- If you can't work, try to think about what alternative activities could bring you satisfaction and keep you busy – for example: volunteering, developing a new hobby, community involvement or joining a group.
- Some people find that their priorities change following their brain injury. Their pace of life changes and they may become more focused on enjoying life in a different way; this might mean spending more time with family, on hobbies or socialising.

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- If you haven't already, consider getting in touch with a brain injury organisation like Headway. This is a good way to meet other people who have gone through similar experiences, to learn more about living with a brain injury and to take part in positive activities (see contact details on page 21).
 - Your abilities may increase over time. So, going back to work may be a possibility in the future. Talk about this with your GP, Occupational Therapist or other people supporting your recovery.
 - Some people return to education or develop a new interest or skill (see contact details on page 24).
 - See **Help and information** on page 24 for contact details for Volunteering Ireland and other organisations that may be of interest to you.
 - If you are unable to go back to your job, other options you could investigate are **starting your own business** or becoming **self-employed**. **Citizens Information** has lots of useful information (www.citizensinformation.ie or see page 23).

“I have a great deal of experience and an awful lot to give. I believe that I can bring something to an organisation. I’ve lost some skills but I still have the ability to contribute.”

Owen, Co Dublin

Help and information

Information and support

Visit www.headway.ie/information to read more booklets in this **Brain Injury Series** and for further information on all services and supports.

t: 1890 200 278 or 01 6040 800

Citizens information

To get free advice on returning to work, payments and grants, call into your local Citizens Information Centre, visit their website or phone them. **t:** 076 107 4000

e: info@ciboard.ie **w:** www.citizensinformation.ie

Social Welfare payments

Dept of Social Protection for information on payments, return to work options and grants.

t: 1890 927 770 **w:** www.welfare.ie

Maximising your abilities and health

Not-for profit organisations

Headway **t:** 1890 200 278 **w:** www.headway.ie

Acquired Brain Injury Ireland

t: 01 280 4164 **w:** www.abiireland.ie

Irish Heart Foundation Stroke Helpline and groups

t: 1800 25 25 50 **w:** www.irishheart.ie

Epilepsy Ireland **t:** 01 455 7500 **w:** www.epilepsy.ie

NCBI (National Council for the Blind Ireland) -

services and support for anyone with vision changes.

w: www.ncbi.ie

Deaf Hear - services and support for hearing loss.
t: 01 817 5700 **w:** www.deafhear.ie

The Irish Wheelchair Association **w:** www.iwa.ie

Public organisations

HSE services - Speech and Language, Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, Counselling, Psychology and other services. Contact your Local HSE Health Office.
HSE infoline **t:** 1850 24 1850 **w:** www.hse.ie

Assist Ireland provides information on aids and adaptive equipment, especially for mobility and communication.
t: 0761 079 200 **e:** support@assistireland.ie
w: www.assistireland.ie

Private services for abilities and health

Speech and Language Therapists for communication skills and swallowing. **e:** info@isti.ie **w:** www.iaslt.ie

Physiotherapists for movement and rebuilding strength.
t: 01 402 2574 **w:** www.cpppp.ie

Occupational Therapists for day-to-day living skills, thinking skills, **Vocational Assessments**, adaptations and equipment.
t: 01 874 8136 **w:** www.aoti.ie

Counselling and psychology

Headway offers brain injury counselling, psychology and **Neuropsychological Assessment**. Waiting lists apply.
t: 1890 200 278 **w:** www.headway.ie

HSE: Primary Care Psychology and Counselling in the Community.
HSE **t:** 1850 24 1850 **w:** www.hse.ie

Accredited **private counsellors** and **psychotherapists**
www.counsellingdirectory.ie, www.iacp.ie, www.iahip.org.

Find registered **Psychologists** through the
Psychological Society of Ireland. **t:** 01 472 0105
w: www.psihq.ie

Rehabilitative training, vocational assessment and preparing for work

Rehabilitative Training and Vocational Assessment – enquire through your Occupational Therapist, a **HSE Occupational Guidance Officer**, a **HSE Disability Manager** or **Disability Case Manager** or the National Rehabilitation Hospital. **HSE t:** 1850 24 1850
w: www.hse.ie

Headway offers rehabilitative training and employment support. **t:** 1890 200 278 **w:** www.headway.ie

The Rehab Group and Quest offer rehabilitative training.
t: 01 2057 200 **w:** www.rehab.ie

Irish Wheelchair Association w: www.iwa.ie

Employment resources

Employability – is a nationwide employment support service for people with disabilities. Visit **www.welfare.ie** and search for ‘Employability’.

Local Employment Service Network – information, guidance and job-searching support and training or educational opportunities.
w: www.localemploymentservices.ie

Self-employment or starting your own business advice from **Citizens Information t:** 076 107 4000
e: info@ciboard.ie **w:** www.citizensinformation.ie

Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed – offers support and information. **w:** www.inou.ie.

Workplace Relations

Independent information and advice on employees' and employers' rights and obligations.

t: 1890 80 80 90 **w:** www.workplacerelations.ie

Volunteering and other activities

Volunteering Ireland

w: www.volunteer.ie for advice and opportunities.

Active Retirement Ireland clubs for the over 55's.

t: 01 873 3836 **w:** www.activeirl.ie

Education

Adult Education Guidance Service – a free service through your local Education Training Board.

w: www.etbi.ie

CareersPortal.ie Career guidance website providing career information and resources.

w: www.careersportal.ie

Contact **www.ahead.ie** regarding disability support at Third Level and work opportunities for graduates.

For employers

Employer Disability Information provides confidential advice and clear information for employers on the recruitment, employment and retention of people with disabilities.

w: www.employerdisabilityinfo.ie. This website is also a good source of information for anyone with a disability who is looking to return to work.

HEADWAY

Brain Injury Services & Support

Charity Number: CHY 7417



**web: www.headway.ie
email: info@headway.ie
tel: 1890 200 278**