

How to look after your mind when your body gets injured

A guide to getting through your recovery period



Understanding the full impact of no-fault injuries

The recovery period that follows a physical injury can be – and often is – accompanied by mental health problems that are invisible to other people.

It can take people injured in no-fault accidents by surprise and, in many cases, deepen the impact of the injuries and lengthen the overall recovery process. It's an experience that nobody plans for and nobody wants.

Our in-depth research found that almost a fifth of people who had been injured in such accidents had suffered from depression for an average of 13 months after the event. Over a third said they suffered from stress and anxiety too, so it's clear to see that these types of accidents can have much deeper impacts than the noticeable physical injuries they inflict on people.



Mental health problems can affect anybody during a physical recovery period.

We understand that it can be difficult to concentrate on making a full physical recovery when negative thoughts and feelings threaten to take over your life – especially when you're least expecting it.

You may have been forced into taking time off work because of your injury, which means you might also have to face the possibility of lost earnings whilst you get better. This isn't fair when the injury simply wasn't your fault. The good news is that the help you need exists and, what's more, it's OK to ask for it.

That's why, as part of our **Make It Right** campaign, we spoke to six experts to point you in the right direction on your road to recovery.

Dr Hilary Jones, Clinical Psychologist Dr Claire Freeman, Physiotherapist Sarah Clifford, Occupational Therapist Claire McGinley, Mental Health Nurse Ray Maramba and Carer Harrison Ojobor all shared their experiences of careers dedicated to guiding people through recovery after physical and mental setbacks.

With their help, we've created this guide to how to look after your mind after you've been injured through no fault of your own. Here, you'll find their advice on how to get your life back on track after an accident:

Section one:

Recognising and addressing the symptoms

The first step towards a positive outcome is finding the opportunity to understand the full extent of your symptoms. The physical pain you're in might make it tough to even think about anything else, but the danger with this is that it risks inadvertently brushing the mental health symptoms to one side and leaving them unaddressed.

Clinical Psychologist Dr Claire Freeman says she has seen patients who found it difficult to talk to people because they felt they 'didn't have the right' to be experiencing such mental health problems after a physical injury. In actual fact, it is this kind of unexpected trauma that gives you every right as a victim to discuss your symptoms.



There is nothing wrong with admitting that you are struggling.

Recognising and addressing the impacts of an accident as early as possible can be the key to a return to full health. It's important to avoid self-diagnosis at home and seek medical advice from a professional like Dr Freeman, who works as a clinical psychologist both privately and for the NHS.

She has helped many patients overcome the traumatic periods that follow serious accidents, so she understands the broad range of symptoms that can impact on people's lives.

"One in three people experience Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after a stressful or traumatic event...and that can be really varied.

"You might expect somebody to have low mood, be anxious, be depressed or have sleep difficulties. When people experience a

trauma in, say, a car accident, you would expect to see a number of symptoms and a number of difficulties that might impact on their day-to-day functioning.”

This is why it's so important to seek medical advice when something doesn't quite feel right – professionals like Dr Freeman have extensive medical practices in place to help people through the recovery periods of such traumas.

Section two:

Coming to terms with the nature of the accident

We understand the unique difficulties involved in recovering from injuries that weren't your fault. We've done our part to help millions of people do just that for over 25 years, so we know it's normal to feel aggrieved after your life gets unexpectedly changed and you're left physically unable to go about your normal daily routine.

As we've discovered in our research, this feeling can be heightened by the vulnerability that follows if your home life, your working life and sometimes even your financial stability are directly affected by the seen and unseen impacts of the accident.

“I think there's a vulnerable feeling at the beginning. Because you've had a big accident, it hasn't been your fault, and you feel like the world's against you, don't you? You're in pain and you shouldn't be, because you were just on your way somewhere.”

Sarah Clifford, Physiotherapist



Alarming, more than six out of 10 people in our survey said that, after a road traffic accident, their injuries had caused them some worry about getting back into a vehicle or onto a bike. This is typical of the PTSD experienced by some of Dr Freeman's patients and it can reveal itself in a number of different ways.



“People might experience nightmares and they might also experience flashbacks. During the day, they might have really visual memories and images of the accident or of the trauma that they've experienced.”

“That can feel really lifelike and actually as if they’re re-experiencing the trauma again.”

Flashbacks are not uncommon in these kinds of situations, but they can prove to be a significant hurdle for some people on their roads to recovery. That’s where the professional help from people like Dr Freeman comes into play.

“It’s about acknowledging that it’s not their fault and building up resilience.”

Dr Claire Freeman, Clinical Psychologist



Coming to terms with the fact that the injury was not your fault means that you can concentrate on what really matters during your recovery process: recovering.

It means that you can give yourself a better chance of moving on by not allowing the fear and blame associated with the accident to control your thought process.

“I’ve seen people in my surgery who have been injured through no fault of their own and are trying to be stoic – they often don’t want to face the fact that they are struggling, be it physically or mentally.”

“But this research shows what GPs like me know – that it is completely normal for the impact of a person’s accident to show itself in more than just a physical injury, and that it’s OK to ask for help.”

Dr Hilary Jones, GP and TV personality



In many ways, asking for the help you need is not a sign of weakness, but a show of strength that allows you to come to terms with the injury and move onwards and upwards with your recovery.

Section three:

Knowing that time spent resting is not wasted time

It is common for people who have suffered from accidental injuries to feel agitated and restless at home because of the disruption to their usual routine. We see it all the time in the stories of our customers – taking the kids to school, doing odd jobs around the house or even getting out of bed can become challenging, if not impossible, tasks.

When we asked healthcare professionals about this, one of the most common themes of their advice to patients was to **take the time you need** to recover properly. Getting life back to the way it was before shouldn’t and can’t be rushed. There’s no need to feel guilty for resting up when you need it the most.

The professionals' top tips for a positive outcome included:

- **Staying in a positive frame of mind:** Try mindfulness techniques, such as yoga, journaling and meditation or even simple activities like reading.
- **Trying not to do too much too soon:** Don't push yourself too hard – give your mind time to recover along with your body.
- **Talking to people around you:** Open up and share your thoughts and feelings about the accident – there may be more help than you realise.

Many people feel that there is still a stigma attached to mental health, so it can be difficult for someone who is already in a vulnerable state to ask for professional help. The simple acts of resting and talking, however, could be exactly the sort of solution both your body and your mind need on the journey back to full health.

The ability of professional help to give you goals for resting and recovery and, indeed, to give you an expert to talk to is invaluable:

“The initial consultation will be hearing their story and hearing about their pain. That in itself is generally a good thing for people to do. It's quite cathartic for people to tell you – and it's all real, it's not just in their heads, and they obviously look at it as something positive by getting some treatment.”

Sarah Clifford, Physiotherapist



Section four:

Embracing the power of talking about it

Whether you are able to talk about it at home with supportive friends and family or you would rather speak to a healthcare professional after an accident, the power of opening up can be remarkable.

We know that it's not always easy to talk about your emotions after a traumatic experience, but it is what people like Dr Freeman deal with on a daily basis – and they know it works because they've seen it time and again:

“It's always really important to hear what a person's been through, to hear their story, so having the time and space for them to be able to do that is essential.

“It might be actually that they haven't had the opportunity to go through in real detail what's happened to them, so even just the process of being able to talk to somebody without being asked lots of questions can be quite validating.”



Dr Freeman has seen many cases in which no-fault accidents have impacted on mental health and says it is all-too-common that patients aren't always aware of the full extent of that impact.

In her experience, someone who's been involved in an accident might say things like "I'm fine, there's nothing wrong". However, once they start talking about the incident, they might visibly start to shake, rock backwards and forwards on their chair or clench their fists as they explain their experiences.

It's only then that signs that someone is struggling can be identified and the help they need can be applied by healthcare professionals.

If you are finding that you are struggling with the deeper impacts of an accident and you need someone to speak to, don't be afraid to seek medical advice to help you regain your health.

It's amazing what talking out loud can do when it comes to both mental and physical recovery from accidental injuries.

Section five:

Seeking the right medical advice at the right time

Some people want to power through the recovery period by jumping straight back into their daily routines, whilst others avoid the very scenarios that are giving them flashbacks, nightmares or sleepless nights. The truth is that neither mindset is ideal according to the healthcare professionals we spoke to as part of our **Make It Right** campaign.

Short-term effects can have long-term impacts if they are left unaddressed, so it's important to recognise any sign of trauma as early as possible. Even if you think you are OK, it won't do any harm to double-check with a healthcare professional before negative thoughts and feelings spiral out of control.

According to Dr Freeman, 'emotional numbing' is a common after-effect of a traumatic injury. This is where the victim

detaches themselves from the experience and, therefore, fails to address the feelings that came along with it.

Needless to say, this has the potential to cause longer-term mental health issues. Dr Freeman employs common approaches like Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) to encourage people to assess their thoughts and feelings about the accident – and how it impacts on their behaviour.

With this kind of medical help, you can work together to challenge those negative thoughts and actually find evidence against them in a step-by-step way. This kind of approach can really help people who have been involved in a car accident build their confidence back up when it comes to getting into or onto a vehicle again.

Knowing when to seek the right help, even when you think you don't need it, can often be the hardest part of recovering from an accident. However, it is exactly this sort of guidance that can help you look after your mind when you've been injured through no fault of your own, so don't be afraid to ask for help if you think you might need it.

Making It Right on the road to recovery

The mental health issues that can arise from a physical injury are nothing to be ashamed about – they might, in fact, be much more common than you think. Be sure to take a look at our in-depth research findings as part of our **Make It Right** campaign to find out more.

Our data exposes the real impacts of no-fault injuries on individuals and loved ones. We believe it's our responsibility to raise awareness of the help that is available to them during the recovery period. We are doing our part to help sufferers relieve at least some of the financial burden of accidental injuries by providing access to compensation. We are also working with physical and mental health experts to facilitate a wider and deeper understanding of what people really go through after such incidents.

We'll be publishing a range of useful guides and interviews throughout the year to help point people in the right direction.



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MAKE IT RIGHT

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