

# Supporting Intimacy After Brain Injury: New research opportunities for OTs

**Wright, H., Walker-Clarke, A., Ward, G., Turner, A., Kidd, L. & Drummond, A.**

**Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository**

**Original citation & hyperlink:**

Wright, H, Walker-Clarke, A, Ward, G, Turner, A, Kidd, L & Drummond, A 2023, 'Supporting Intimacy After Brain Injury: New research opportunities for OTs' *OTnews*, pp. 36-37.

Publisher: Royal College of Occupational Therapists

Copyright © and Moral Rights are retained by the author(s) and/ or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This item cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

This document is the author's post-print version, incorporating any revisions agreed during the peer-review process. Some differences between the published version and this version may remain and you are advised to consult the published version if you wish to cite from it.

## **Supporting intimacy after brain injury – New research opportunities for OTs**

*Dr Hayley Wright, Aimee Walker-Clarke, Dr Gillian Ward, Prof Andy Turner, Prof Lisa Kidd, Prof Avril Drummond*

The long-term consequences for people living with acquired brain injury (ABI) also impact upon their close family members, with partners often becoming informal caregivers. Many relationships break down as couples struggle to adapt to new roles, adding more distress to those already going through life-changing experiences.

Psychological distress can cause – and be caused by - sexual and intimacy concerns. The interdependent relationship between mental and sexual wellbeing highlights the urgent need to support *both* elements simultaneously to maximise benefit.

### **Time for policy change**

National, political, and strategic interest in this topic has been evidenced most recently by *The Lancet Neurology* Commission (Menon and Bryant, 2019) and All-Party Parliamentary Group for ABI (Balogun *et al.*, 2020) campaigns to improve neurorehabilitation services. These issues also align with the World Health Organization (2017) report on sexual and reproductive health, and the James Lind Alliance Top Ten Priorities for improving psychological wellbeing in stroke rehabilitation and long-term care.

### **Why is this important for Occupational Therapists?**

Between 54% and 75% of people experience sexual wellbeing problems after ABI (Moreno, Gan and Zasler, 2017; Zarreii, Humayun and Horn, 2018) equating to approximately 1.6 million people in the UK alone. These astounding figures highlight the clear **unmet need** for support solutions in this area.

However, there is no consensus on when, how or by whom sexual wellbeing should be supported following ABI.

Early Supported Discharge models discharge patients from specialist services before intimacy issues typically manifest, which is around 3-6 months post-injury. Occupational Therapy is most likely to be ongoing at this time for people with ABI, and so Occupational Therapists (OTs) are often well positioned to initiate and respond to discussions of this nature. However, there is lack of formal education for OTs relating to sexual wellbeing, particularly following disability and/or brain injury. Many OTs feel ill-equipped to adequately support sexual or intimacy concerns or needs of people with an ABI.

### **Co-designed innovative solutions**

Researchers at Coventry University and colleagues have gained funding to explore this important area. Research is underway to co-design and test a novel online, peer-support

self-management programme ([HOPE4ABI](#)), for ABI survivors to learn to manage their own mental and sexual wellbeing, at their own pace.

There are key opportunities for OTs to get involved and help shape the future of this research.

- i) [Coventry University Trailblazer PhD studentship](#): a 3-year funded PhD to co-develop and test the first evidence-based, peer-support programme for *partners* of people living with ABI to self-manage their psychological and sexual wellbeing.
- ii) [Doctoral Training Alliance PhD studentship](#): a 3-year funded PhD to develop a digital toolkit specifically for use by OTs to support people with sexual wellbeing issues following ABI.
- iii) Brain Injury Research Group: led by Coventry University to bring together a multidisciplinary, collaborative research group of experts (by profession and/or lived experience) to critique, co-design, user-test and improve research questions, methods, interventions, and patient outcomes.

### **Get in touch**

For more information about the research, PhD studentship opportunities, or getting involved in the Brain Injury Research Group you can contact the project lead, Dr Hayley Wright ([hayley.wright@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:hayley.wright@coventry.ac.uk)) with comments, questions, or your own experiences.

Look for updates on social media @drhayleymwright #HOPE4ABI

### **References**

- Balogun, B., Woodhouse, J., Powell, T., Long, R., Beard, J., Kennedy, S. et al. (2020). 'House of Commons Debate Pack: Acquired Brain Injury' Number CDP 2020/0026. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2020-0026/> (Accessed: 13 January 2023)
- Menon, D. K. and Bryant, C. (2019). 'Time for change in acquired brain injury', *Lancet Neurology*, 18(1), pp. 28. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1474-4422\(18\)30463-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1474-4422(18)30463-0) (Accessed: 13 January 2023)
- Moreno, A., Gan, C. and Zasler, N. D. (2017). 'Neurosexuality: A transdisciplinary approach to sexuality in neurorehabilitation', *NeuroRehabilitation*, 41(2), pp. 255–259. Available at: <https://content.iospress.com/download/neurorehabilitation/nre001480?id=neurorehabilitation%2Fne001480> (Accessed: 13 January 2023)
- World Health Organization (2017). *Sexual health and its linkages to reproductive health: an operational approach*. Available at: <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/258738/9789241512886-eng.pdf> (Accessed: 13 January 2023)
- Zarreii, P., Humayun, M. and Horn L. (2018). *Sexual Dysfunction in Acquired Brain Injury (ABI)*. Available at: <https://now.aapmr.org/sexual-dysfunction-in-acquired-brain-injury-abi/> (Accessed: 13 January 2023)