

# Adjusting to Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)

## What is Adjustment

Adjusting is defined as adapting to a new or altered condition or situation. Everyone makes adjustments during their lifetime. Some are planned and some adjustments are forced through an unplanned event such as when a person is injured in an accident or suffers a serious medical event.

## After Spinal Cord Injury

A spinal cord injury (SCI) is one of the most devastating injuries that can be experienced whether through a traumatic or medical event. It may result in the loss of some or all of an individual's sensation and movement and control over other bodily functions. The process of adjusting to the SCI is a unique one and will be experienced differently by each person.

The way you adapt to your SCI may depend on a number of things; for example your life experiences prior to your injury, how you respond to stress and change, where you are from, your background and culture, family and community supports. Your individual circumstances shape who you are and will also influence the process of adjustment to life with a spinal cord injury. This adjusting phase may take time and you will be faced with many challenges, but it's important to know that people with a SCI do move on to lead productive and fulfilling lives.

It is not uncommon for individuals with a new injury to find it difficult to imagine how life will be after a SCI and what there is to look forward to. Initially it will be hard to imagine where you fit in across relationships, work and in your social domains. Your injury will mean a number of changes in your life and the experience and those factors referred to earlier, will be different for each person depending on the level and completeness of the injury.

### Some of the physical changes you may expect may include:

- Differences in physical functioning and mobility.
- Adapting the way you manage your bladder and bowel functions.
- More time being devoted to your health and well-being.
- Changes in your sexual function.
- New approaches to hobbies, interests and work.
- Requiring assistance with everyday tasks.



**Some of the practical considerations may be:**

- A difference in your household income.
- Modifications to your home environment.
- Changes to your previous level of independence.
- Modifications to your workplace, or consideration of a new vocation.
- Managing a range of services that may be involved with you, including personal care services.

## Reactions to Stress

There are some common reactions to stress that may be experienced as the reality of your SCI sinks in. The follow are some of the psychological and emotional effects you may experience.

- Feeling irritable or even angry.
- Feelings of grief and/or prolonged sadness.
- Loss of pleasure, feeling hopeless and/or having thoughts of suicide.
- Feeling anxious, worrying or finding it hard to wind down.
- Recurring memories or mental pictures of how you sustained your injury.
- Changes in your levels of concentration.
- Changes in your day-to-day memory.
- Changes in your sleeping habits.
- An increased use of substances.
- Difficulty managing pain.
- Reduced self-esteem.
- Change in your body image.

Sustaining a spinal cord injury may lead a person to go through a period of grief as one would when faced with a major loss in their life. Grief is very personal and there is no right or wrong way, or time limits set. However it is important to understand some of the common feelings and thoughts that are associated with grief:

**Denial or disbelief:** You may feel your injury is temporary and that you will get better or have thoughts of “This isn’t happening to me” or “I will walk out of here, I will be fine”

**Anger:** “Why is this happening to me?” “What did I do to deserve this?” are common thoughts. Blaming others and feeling angry with others involved in your accident or with family members is common. Sometimes the person is angry at themselves.

**Bargaining:** You may start to acknowledge the injury but try to bargain for a cure “I’ll give anything to walk again”

**Sadness:** Sadness after SCI is common. Prolonged sadness may be seen as early depression but this is not necessarily the case and you may need to seek psychological support to help you move on from this stage in the grieving process.

**Acceptance:** Grieving usually ends as you come to accept a realistic view of your current condition and find meaning in your life. You will be able to think about your future with a SCI and start setting goals to pursue life.

It is normal at first to feel angry, sad, cheated and/or frustrated about what you have lost as a result of your spinal injury. Try to focus on your strengths, your remaining physical function and your capabilities and what you can improve upon.

Work at letting go of what you cannot control or change as this will help you move forward and help you re-establish a meaningful and fulfilling life.

You may find it useful to talk to a health professional or a Peer Support worker about life and what to expect and where to access information. Attend education sessions and educate yourself about your condition and how your body works, as understanding your injury can help you plan for your future and help you regain a sense of control in your life.

Invest time in keeping well. If you are well you can focus on relationships, family, employment, study and things that give you enjoyment and happiness.

Communicate with friends and family as this is such an important area in your life and remember that those closest to you are going through this adjustment process too, and may be experiencing difficulty with adjusting as well.



## Contacts

Keep regular contact with:

**Hampstead SIU Heath Team 8222 1600**

Or

**PQSA 8355 3500**

- Peer Support Advocates
- Home Base Counsellor
- Spinal Nurse Advisors

[www.pqsa.asn.au](http://www.pqsa.asn.au)

Contact your GP and discuss your needs and circumstances. They may be able to recommend Psychology services in your area and apply for Medicare funded services currently available.

Life line 13 11 14

## References and Resources

Spinal Cord Injury Information Network: Adjustment to SCI Fact Sheet 20, University of Alabama.  
[www.spinalcord.uab.edu](http://www.spinalcord.uab.edu)

Dezarnaulds A & Ilchef R (2002) Psychological Adjustment after SCI.

NSW State Spinal Cord Injury Directory of Information and Support.  
[www.aci.health.nsw.gov.au](http://www.aci.health.nsw.gov.au)

QLD Spinal Injury Services Handbook of Spinal Cord Injuries (2002) 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.