

## **An Over-Representation of People with a Traumatic Brain Injury in the Criminal Justice System**

**Angela Gordon and Luis Palmer**

### **The link between brain injury and mental health**

Charities such as the Stroke Association have been found to be invaluable for people who have reached out for ongoing support after hospital treatment has ended. Another national charity, Headway, I have worked with for many years, and again, the support they provide to people who have experienced brain injuries has made a significant difference to lives. A concern highlighted by the charity informs that some individuals who have experienced a traumatic brain injury are over-represented in the criminal justice system and there is criticism of the lack of appropriate and specialist rehabilitation services to this group of individuals (Headway, 2016). The link between brain injury and mental health has been raised by representatives of brain injury treatment and this may indicate a greater need for additional resources for these complex and potentially life-changing conditions.

### **Further research**

There is a need for more research and data regarding brain injury among the Caribbean population in the UK. In Leicestershire, among the Asian population, research is ongoing which aims to understand the impact a brain injury can have on a person and their carers. There is a need to expand research to include all minority populations in the UK as it may inform other socioeconomic factors.

### **My reflection by Angela Gordon**

I am now in a position where I can stand back slightly from a busy, eventful and thoroughly enjoyable career. I can now take stock of all I have achieved and be glad I have had an opportunity to meet some amazing people who have just as much looked after me as I have them. I have worked with very skilled and intelligent therapists from whom I have learnt a lot. Occupational therapists are multi-talented professionals, however, we have work to do, even if it is explaining clearly what our profession does and what makes occupational therapy different to the many other therapies that exist. The emphasis on the environment is important, as is our mission to support independence and quality of life. Sadly, we are confined in what we can provide when we work in an institution. I fully accept, our public

services do not have an endless pot of resources allowing occupational therapists to truly work in a client-centred manner, and for the many people who experience life-changing illness or accident, our therapy could potentially continue with patients/clients for years.

The opportunity I took in working as an independent therapist has allowed me to achieve the job satisfaction I missed when working for an institution. I work as an holistic, client-centred therapist, supporting clients to achieve a much wider range of meaningful occupations.

Supporting a client to return to his hobby of paint balling, or taking a train journey for the first time since diagnosis, assisting a client make the walk to the beach which she missed tremendously or attending the university play a client achieved after a traumatic brain injury as a young teenager may never have been experienced if I had been working in an institution. There is a need to focus on what may be perceived as the most important occupations for individuals. This may include independence with personal care, achieving the very basic in terms of domestic activity and being able to move within their environment safely. Life is much more than this and many people will connect with the wider range of occupations they need to fulfil and/or enjoy life.

The nature of brain injury, irrespective of whether it is a mild, moderate or severe, requires time for healing and adjustment. Very few patients will achieve a full recovery with a handful of treatment sessions. Recovery may continue for years to come and this message sadly is not always shared with the person and their carer. A patient may be left thinking they may never achieve full recovery as they were unable to achieve their goals in the handful of treatment sessions on offer. I have had numerous opportunities to reassure a person that goals can still be achieved even years after a brain injury. The fact that a person needs to be ready for rehabilitation is also important, as not everyone's recovery happens in the same way or at the same time. For those people who may not achieve the recovery they would like, there is still satisfaction that they have taken small steps to improve and that the achievement can be maintained with regular therapeutic input. I now accept many people invest in therapy as they may potentially invest in attending a gym to maintain good physical and mental health.

Therapeutic relations can develop into friendships while always remaining professional. A therapeutic relationship can continue for years, as goals are achieved and new goals agreed. This is the dynamic system Ikiugu (2004) spoke about in his instrumentalism in occupational therapy process. Nothing is stagnant, there is a continuous movement of occupational

performance in all areas of life. Occupational therapy in the long term will highlight new areas of activity the person may not have considered. The end result of this is the full harness of occupational engagement and physical and mental health well-being not only for the person but also their carers.

### **Off The Canvas: rehabilitation reimaged by Luis Palmer**

Inspired by my own recovery and professional training, I created Off The Canvas (OTC) – a community interest company built on the foundations of occupational therapy, non-contact boxing, and person-centred rehabilitation. It is designed to serve individuals living with brain injuries, neurological conditions, mental health difficulties, or those simply seeking structure and resilience in their lives.

OTC is more than just a boxing programme. It is a holistic intervention that integrates:

1. **Occupational therapy principles:** Every session considers identity, environment, function, and emotional well-being.
2. **Boxing for neurorehabilitation:** Non-contact boxing promotes coordination, cognitive engagement, mood regulation, and physical conditioning – all vital post-injury.
3. **Client-centred practice:** Sessions are adapted around personal goals, ability levels, and clinical safety. Where appropriate, formal risk assessments are conducted to ensure physical and cognitive suitability.

In many ways, OTC reflects the same ethos seen in Mr. Benjamin's recovery: that healing is not linear, and that a sense of purpose and mastery must be central. OTC also fills the gaps in community rehab provision, especially for those waiting months to access statutory services.

Our services include:

- group and 1:1 boxing rehabilitation sessions.
- mood and fatigue management workshops.
- activity analysis and functional goal setting.

- peer support through shared experience.
- adapted programming for those with cognitive or physical challenges.

What OTC sets out to achieve:

- restore a sense of agency and self-belief.
- improve cognitive function, emotional regulation, and physical health.
- provide long-term rehabilitation pathways rooted in lived experience.
- promote inclusion, especially for underrepresented communities.

I believe that given the right support, structure, and environment, anyone can come ‘off the canvas’ and start to rebuild. This isn’t just my slogan – it’s a lived truth.

### **Occupational gift**

#### ***Caribbean gift to the reader: coconut tart***



Image Credit: Angela Gordon

Place the grated coconut in a bowl, and place the bowl over a pan of water which is slowly being warmed on the hob. Add soft brown sugar by the spoonful.

Continue to stir until the sugar has melted. Add a few drops of brown sugar water to the mixture as the sugar melts and the contents start to stick together.

Add a good measure of grated nutmeg and a few drops of vanilla essence.

Leave to cool until ready to add to your pastry.

## References

Headway. (July 2016). Traumatic brain injury costs. Available at: [https://](https://headway.org.uk/about-brain-injury/further-information/statistics/)

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