

Brain Injury and Veterans

Most Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBIs) among veterans are from explosions and combat. PTSD often occurs along with the TBI because of the traumatic event that caused it.

414,000

The number of military members diagnosed with TBI from 2000 to late 2019 - most were mild. (Defense & Veterans Brain Injury Center) (Mild injury does not necessarily mean mild outcome.)

Higher Rates

Service members with TBIs have higher rates of PTSD, depressive disorder, substance use disorder, and anxiety disorder than those without TBI.

84%

Veterans with mTBI (mild) had greater combat exposure; less social support; and more comorbidities, including asthma, PTSD, sleeping problems, worse pain scores and slower processing speed.

BEST PRACTICE

People working with veterans should:

- SCREEN for prior history of Brain Injury
- ASSESS Cognitive & Functional Impairment
- EDUCATE staff on Brain Injury
- EDUCATE the veteran about their Brain Injury
- PROVIDE and TEACH Accommodations
- CONNECT Veteran with Community Resources

COMMON PROBLEMS

After Brain Injury, we often see problems with:

Attention, memory and new learning
Slowed speed of processing
Organization, problem solving & impulsivity
Irritability, frustration & agitation
Balance, dizziness & headaches
Poor awareness of deficits & difficulties
Difficulty being flexible, poor self-monitoring

“Veterans who use VA health care must undergo mandatory TBI screening if they served in combat operations.” U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

People working with veterans may see:

Looking uninterested because they cannot pay attention
Appearance of defiance because they cannot remember the rules
Slow to follow directions because they cannot process quickly
Getting into fights because of irritability, anger and impulsivity
Falling into things, often getting hurt
Difficulty re-entering community because of cognitive changes
Getting stuck on an idea or a way of doing something, does not recognize mistakes

“Veterans are more likely to be civically engaged than non-veterans and, on average, veterans contribute more time in their communities than non-veterans.” Nat’l Conference on Citizenship

Common Accommodations for Brain Injury Challenges

Here are some common and simple accommodations:

Working for shorter periods of time
Getting rid of distractions, like noise or movement
Taking notes (on paper, in a notebook, on a phone or computer)
Using a phone to set timers to remember appointments
Repeating information to the person
Slowing down when talking; giving them more time to respond
Giving the person a list of house rules, written directions, or pictures to help them understand and remember
Coaching the person with the injury to “Stop, think and plan” then act

Coaching the person to take deep breaths when feeling angry or anxious

Tools for Best Practice

Brain Injury Screening Resources:

NASHIA's OBISSS: <https://www.nashia.org/obisssprogram> - The OBISSS is highly recommended. It is made up of the OSU screening tool, a Symptoms Questionnaire and Strategies. It can be used electronically, on a computer, phone or ipad. It can be self-administered.

OSU TBI Identification Method: <https://wexnermedical.osu.edu/neurological-institute/neuroscience-research-institute/research-centers/ohio-valley-center-for-brain-injury-prevention-and-rehabilitation/osu-tbi-id>

Brain Links' Strategies & Accommodations Tool: <https://www.tndisability.org/rehabilitation>

Symptom Questionnaire and Cognitive Strategies:

Adult: bit.ly/3FLkz0V

Juvenile: bit.ly/4iS2bSC

Tennessee Resources

Brain Links' Website with many resources: <https://www.tndisability.org/brain>

Brain Links' Toolkits (for Service Professionals and Survivors):

<https://www.tndisability.org/brain-toolkits>

TN Department of Health TBI Program:

<https://tinyurl.com/3v5jrdt3>

Tennessee Brighter Futures' Resource Pages & Training for Brain Injury:

<https://www.tndisability.org/tbf-brain-injury>

Resource Pages & Training on Aging and Brain Injury:

<https://www.tndisability.org/tbf-social-determinants-health>

Resource Pages & Training for Veterans Health

<https://www.tndisability.org/tbf-social-determinants-health>

TN Brighter Futures is organized and facilitated by Brain Links through a contract from the TN Department of Health TBI Program.

References:

Understanding military traumatic brain injury. (2025) DAV.org <https://www.dav.org/get-help-now/veteran-topics-resources/traumatic-brain-injury-tbi/>

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