Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center (DVBIC): Strategies for Success: Returning to School with Brain Injury

Jill Storms, OTR/L
Marlene Specht, MA, CCC-SLP
Carey Pawlowski, PhD
A New Generation Of Combat Veterans
Objectives:

- Present an overview of brain injury and related symptoms
- Suggest some strategies to consider to help compensate for symptoms
- Offer recommendations for successful return to the classroom
- Provide additional resources
What causes TBI?

- Motor Vehicle Accidents
- Falls
- Assault
- Sports
- Gun shot wounds
- Blasts are a leading cause of TBI in war zones.
A traumatic brain injury (TBI) is the result of a blow or jolt to the head or a penetrating head injury that disrupts the function of the brain. Not all blows or jolts to the head result in a TBI.

The severity of a TBI may range from mild - a brief change in mental status (“saw stars” or “got their bell rung”) or consciousness (< 30 min) - to severe, an extended period of unconsciousness or amnesia after the injury.
The terms concussion and mild TBI (mTBI) are interchangeable.

Most TBIs are mild, and those who sustain them usually recover completely within 1 to 3 months. However, sometimes symptoms persist and help is available.

Not all people have all symptoms.

Severity of symptoms varies among people.
The severity rating of the injury (mild, moderate, severe) is not a statement in regard to the severity of the symptoms. Just because individuals may have a diagnosis of mild TBI, it doesn’t mean that all of their symptoms are mild! They may have severe headaches or moderate problems with memory. Conversely, someone who sustained a severe TBI, over time, may have only mild functional problems.

Symptoms are often categorized into physical, cognitive (thinking), and emotional/psychosocial (social and psychological behavior) or neurobehavioral symptoms.
Symptoms: Physical

- Headache
- Sleep Problems
- Fatigue, Get tired easily
- Dizziness, Balance problems
- Visual impairment, photophobia – glare
- Change in hearing, ringing in the ears, phonophobia
- Change in sense of taste & smell
- Weakness on one side of the body
Symptoms: Cognitive (thinking)

- Memory loss
- Poor concentration and attention
- Problems initiating, planning and following-up
- Problems in judgment
- Word-finding difficulty
- Slowness of thought processes
- Slowness or difficulty with speech
- Increase need for simple, concrete directions
- Problems with perception and direction
Symptoms: Neurobehavioral

- Irritability/Agitation/Outbursts
- Anxiety and/or depression
- Mood swings
- Denial
- Socially challenging behaviors: disinhibition, impulsive behavior
- Apathy
- Difficulty grasping another’s point of view
- Loss of social network/isolation
- Overlap with Combat Stress symptoms
Managing Physical Symptoms

- Treatment is available - talk to your medical providers for specific recommendations.

- Headache, Sleep Problems, & Fatigue are common after TBI & can affect academic performance.

- Get plenty of physical exercise, sleep and rest; limit alcohol & caffeine; pace yourself.

- Visual problems: Glare - Baseball cap, consider the direction and type of lighting, tinted lenses, take breaks to reduce eye strain, talk to your doctor.
Strategies for Success

- We all use compensatory strategies to help us accomplish our goals & manage our busy lives due to basic human limitations.

- Know your strengths! Strengths are used to compensate for areas effected by your injury.

- Knowing your learning style & using your preferred style is an example of using your strengths.

- Real Warriors (DCoE): You are not alone. Treatment works. The earlier the intervention, the better. Reaching out is an act of Courage and Strength!
Strategies For Success

“Tell me, and I’ll forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand.”
(Chinese Proverb)

Marlene Specht, MA, CCC-SLP
Presentation Objectives

- Provide education about factors to consider when returning to school after a traumatic brain injury (TBI).
- Provide general information on how a TBI can affect a service member’s ability to return to school.
- Provide education on strategies that teachers, counselors, and service members can use to help compensate for some of the effects of the traumatic brain injury.
Considerations when returning to school

Many of our service members that we serve are unfamiliar with the college process.

Some of them may not be familiar with:

- How to enroll in classes through Disability Support Services
- Taking a class for a pass or fail and not a letter grade
- What credits are transferrable
- How to prepare for tests
- Accommodations (note taker, extra time on tests) that could help them be successful
Where to start?

Service members can:

- Consult with your Neuropsychologist, Rehab Psychologist, and/or Speech Pathologist to determine if you are ready for school and which classes would be best to enroll in.
- Enroll through Disability Support Services to get the extra help you need.
- Express your strengths and weaknesses to the counselor in the Disability Support Services as well as your teachers if you feel comfortable so that they can recommend the appropriate accommodations.
TBI can affect:

- Cognition-memory, attention, organization, problem solving, processing
- Speech-slurred speech
- Language-auditory comprehension, naming, reading, and writing
- Visual scanning, visual spatial skills
- Social interactions
Service members may:

- Have headaches or physical pain which may make it difficult for him/her to concentrate during class.
- Have difficulty absorbing/comprehending the information at the speed in which it is presented in the classroom.
- Not ask questions because they do not want to call attention to themselves if they have a change in body image (loss of limb, weakness) or communication skills (slurred speech, difficulty formulating their thoughts to ask the question)
- Not question the teacher because they are used to not questioning authority due to their military experience
General Strategies

How do we help them?

- Educate the service members, counselors, and teachers on strategies that could be used to compensate for the problems that was a result of the traumatic brain injury.
To improve memory

- Write down information
- Enter information in your PDA (Blackberry)
- Hi-light key points as information is read
- Repeat a task several times
- Watch for and remember landmarks while walking on campus to help remember the paths to the classroom or offices
To improve attention

- Double check work because some details may be missed as a result of poor attention.
- Read information aloud to improve accuracy of what is being read.
- Work in a quiet room when possible to help stay on task.
- If possible, sit in a location in the classroom that is free of distractions.
To improve organizational skills

- Organize belongings the night before an event or appointment so you are not rushed in the morning
- Keep a filing system so that you can easily find what you need
- Keep checklists and check off tasks as you complete them
- Prioritize tasks when making a to-do-list
- Set timers when you are doing a task to make sure you stop in time so you do not get off schedule
To improve problem solving

- Identify and write down what the problem is and the goal you want to achieve
- Brainstorm to generate a list of possible approaches that may be taken to solve the problem
- Select what appears to be the best way to solve it. Writing down pros and cons for each possible solution may help you see which is the best solution
- List, in order, all the steps or actions which must be taken to carry out the solution
- Take each action in the appropriate sequence
- Decide if the desired outcome has been obtained. If not, repeat the steps above
To improve processing skills

- Allow for extra time for thinking/doing
- Ask others to slow down when speaking to you
- Ask the speaker to repeat the information
- Repeat back the information to the speaker to make sure you did not miss any details
To improve speech

- Face the listener when speaking
- Talk in a quiet environment when possible
- Talk slowly
- Over pronounce words
- Take a deep breath before speaking if others are having difficulty hearing what you said
To improve auditory comprehension

- Make eye contact prior to engaging in conversation
- Talk in a quiet environment
- Give or ask for limited amounts of information
- When discussing information, refer to handouts/written information to increase understanding
- Ask others to speak slowly so it is easier to understand the information
- Ask if the material makes sense or not. If not, ask the speaker to explain it again or in a different way (use visual material in addition to verbally presenting it)
To improve naming skills

- Allow extra time to think of the words you want to say.
- Use descriptions (what does the object do) if you can’t think of the word you want to say.
- If the listener is unsure of what the service member is trying to communicate, the listener can paraphrase back what he/she said.
To improve reading comprehension

- Scan the entire page first before reading it.
- Read the information aloud and then re-read it to improve comprehension.
- Ask the service member to explain back what was read so you know he/she has understood it.
To improve writing skills

- Use lined paper when possible
- When writing a paragraph, think about what you want to write to give yourself time to organize your ideas
- Write down key words you want to include in the paragraph
- Develop an outline to keep your ideas organized
To improve visual scanning or visual spatial skills

- Use a paper guide (folded piece of paper so that the paper is placed under the line he/she is reading) or finger while scanning to help keep your place. The less information to scan the better. Math can be particularly difficult for someone with visual scanning/visual spatial problems.

- Use lined paper to help with writing or printing in a straight line.

- Make sure you scan in the area you were sitting before you leave since you may overlook items that you brought with you.
To improve social skills:

- Others may give you feedback at the time you say or do something that is inappropriate by telling you that what you said or did made the listener feel uncomfortable. By having others give you immediate feedback, they will be helping you even though it can feel awkward.
Social Do’s

- **Do**
  - Make eye contact and smile at others
  - Say "please" and "thank you"
  - Ask for help when you need it
  - Offer to help others when it looks like they need assistance
  - Accept help when it is offered or decline graciously
  - Ask someone to please speak louder if you can't hear them
  - Initiate conversations and keep them going, i.e., make "small talk"
  - Try to remember and use people's names
  - When you are frustrated, say so rather than expressing it nonverbally
  - Consider other’s feelings when you are trying to say something funny
Social Don’ts

- **Don't**
- Use profanity in mixed company
- Use sarcasm or tease in a critical manner even when “kidding”
- Make negative comments about other's appearance
- Flirt or joke around in a sexually suggestive way
- Touch or hug members of the opposite sex without asking permission
- Ignore people just because you can't hear them
In conclusion

- Choosing a new path in life is not an easy task
- VA staff, counselors, and teachers are there to help you
- Know your strengths and the strategies that you can use to help you when things are difficult
- Believe in yourself!

“In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.”

Albert Einstein
Strategies For Success: Managing Co-occurring Emotional Challenges

Carey Pawlowski, PhD
Neurorehabilitation Psychologist
Presentation Objectives

- Increase awareness of co-morbidities with TBI
- Address emotional challenges involved in returning to school
- Provide recommendations for successful return to the classroom in light of emotional challenges
Co-morbidities with TBI

- Anxiety
- PTSD
- Depression
- Social challenges
- Pain
- Physical changes
- (3 P’s)
Significant overlap of PTSD and TBI

PTSD
- Flashbacks
- Avoidance
- Hypervigilance
- Nightmares
- Re-experiencing phenomenon
- Cognitive Deficits
- Irritability
- Insomnia
- Depression
- Fatigue
- Anxiety

TBI
- Headache
- Sensitivity to light or noise
- Nausea/vomiting
- Vision Problems
- Dizziness

- Sensitivity to light or noise
- Nausea/vomiting
- Vision Problems
- Dizziness
Challenges and Strategies: TBI and PTSD

Situation:

- Sometimes the individual might feel uncomfortable around crowds
  - Being in a classroom (with a lot of other service members)
  - Being in a public place with crowds of people.
Challenges and Strategies: TBI and PTSD

Strategies for managing discomfort with crowds in the classroom:

- The service member might feel more comfortable sitting in a place where he/she feels safe.
- They may like to sit where they can see the door or a place in which they do not have anyone sitting behind them so that they can scan the entire environment.
Challenges and Strategies: TBI and PTSD

Situation:

The service member may have an overactive startle response. S/he may be easily startled over loud noises or if someone approaches him or her from behind.
Challenges and Strategies: TBI and PTSD

Strategies for managing overactive startle reflex:

1) Learn relaxation skills
   - Relaxation can be a powerful tool in managing the fear and anxiety that accompanies PTSD symptoms.
   - **Deep breathing exercises** are a very simple, yet effective, way of managing one’s anxiety in the moment.
   - [www.allaboutdepression.com/relax/](http://www.allaboutdepression.com/relax/)
2) **Use healthy distractions**

Distraction can be a useful way of coping with stressful thoughts or feelings that seem overpowering.

- Distraction may take the form of reading a book, talking to a friend, taking a bath, watching a movie (although make sure the movie does not have any triggering images in it), or exercise.

- It is important to remember that distraction is about getting through a tough moment as opposed to trying to avoid distress. After your distress has subsided, it is important to examine what triggered you and identify other ways you could have managed that distress.
Challenges and Strategies: TBI and PTSD

Situation:

The service member may be socially withdrawn. People with PTSD symptoms often feel disconnected or detached from others, even people that they were once close to.
Challenges and Strategies: TBI and PTSD

Strategies:

1) **Lean on others**

- Someone with PTSD symptoms may have a difficult time opening up or disclosing information about their experience as a result of feeling ashamed or not wanting to burden another person.

- However, it is clear that people with PTSD symptoms do better the more social support they have. Therefore, even though it may be difficult to do, it is important to establish supportive relationships with people they trust and who are willing to be there for them.
Challenges and Strategies: TBI and PTSD

2) Identify and take part in positive activities

- People with brain injury, depression, and/or PTSD symptoms may find that certain activities are no longer pleasurable, or that they may be afraid to go out and do the things they once enjoyed. However, this avoidance only maintains feelings of despair and depression.

- It is important to continue to do the things that you used to enjoy, even if you do not feel as though they are pleasurable in the moment. Your ability to do this will come in time, and this may prevent your depression and anxiety from getting worse.
Challenges and Strategies: TBI and PTSD

Situation:

The experiences one had during war are often kept untold. The service member may be a very private person and needs to gain complete trust from others before engaging in general conversation.
Challenges and Strategies: TBI and PTSD

- **Strategy:** Consider seeking treatment from a trained therapist and/or join a support group
  
  A number of individual treatment options as well as support groups are available for people with PTSD. Listening to other peoples' experiences with PTSD can help validate the feelings you may be experiencing.

  You can also learn from how other people have overcome the effects of a traumatic experience. You can learn more about available treatment options in your area through the National Alliance on Mental Illness, your local Vet Center or your local Veterans Affairs Hospital.
Tips for Communicating with People with TBI and PTSD

- (Note: Many people who have PTSD don't need any assistance.)
- Stress can sometimes affect a person's behavior or work performance. Do your best to minimize high pressure situations.
- People experience trauma differently and will have their own various coping and healing mechanisms, so treat each person as an individual. Ask what will make him or her most comfortable and respect his or her needs.
- Be tolerant if the person repeats his or her stories and experiences, and avoid interrupting the person.
- In a crisis, remain calm, be supportive and remember that the effects of PTSD are normal reactions to an abnormal situation. Ask how you can help the person, and find out if there is a support person you can contact (such as a family member or your company's Employee Assistance Program). If appropriate, you might ask if the person has medication that he or she needs to take.
Tips to enhance success in working with service members with TBI and PTSD

- Relax.
- Treat the individual with dignity, respect and courtesy.
- Listen to the individual.
- Offer assistance but do not insist or be offended if your offer is not accepted.
- Don't be afraid to say "I don't know," or "Let me check." You can be clear about the limits of your authority or ability to respond to a person's needs or requests.
- Be mindful that symptoms of TBI and PTSD may fluctuate and are influenced by many factors - there may be periods of ease and comfort as well as more challenging times.
- Support, patience and understanding go a long way. Be generous with these.
Challenges and Strategies: TBI and Pain

Situation:

- The service member might be experiencing pain such that s/he cannot tolerate sitting in the classroom for long periods of time.
Challenges and Strategies: TBI and Pain

Strategies:
- Discuss with the instructor beforehand about particular needs
  - Sitting in the back of the classroom
  - Standing up as needed
  - Taking brief breaks
  - Stretching
Challenges and Strategies: TBI and Pain

- Pacing of activities
  - Time-based pacing
  - Task-based pacing
- Seek treatment from a rehabilitation psychologist or a health psychologist (who are specially trained in behavioral pain management)
Challenges and Strategies: TBI and Depression

- Co-morbidity of pain and depression
- Co-morbidity of PTSD and depression
- Behavioral activation
- Seek treatment from a rehabilitation psychologist, neuropsychologist, or psychiatrist
The 3 “P”s of the Success/Progression Process:

- Passion
- Patience
- Persistence
Strengths

- Confidence ("When you have confidence in yourself, you gain the confidence of others")
- Sense of Humor
- External resources
- Other strengths?
Parting thoughts….

- We cannot direct the wind, but we can adjust our sails.
Resources and Additional Training

Jill Storms, OTR/L
DVBIC Regional Education Coordinator
Palo Alto, CA
www.dvbic.org

- DVBIC Network Interactive Map of Regional Education & Care Coordination
- Research
- TBI Information & Training

www.dcoe.health.mil/
www.brainline.org

• Webcasts, Podcasts, Interviews
• Substance Abuse and TBI
• Caregiving and TBI: “What You Need to Know”
• After the Injury: “Acute Care and TBI”
• Concussion: “Understanding Mild TBI”

• Social Networking, Ask the Expert, Authoritative Articles, Book Excerpts, Daily updates
Welcome to The Journey Home - the CEMM Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) Web Site. This site provides an informative and sensitive exploration of Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), including information for patients, family members, and caregivers. Topics include types and symptoms of brain injury, TBI treatment and recovery, and helpful insights about the potential long-term effects of brain injury. Animation is used to help patients clearly understand the brain, and the results of injuries to different parts of the brain. Survivors and their caregivers share courageous stories about their own experiences, providing down-to-earth facts along with inspiration and hope. Watch Program Introduction Video Now!
Contact Information

- Jill Storms, OTR/L, DVBIC Regional Education Coordinator:  jill.storms@va.gov  
  650-493-5000 x65468

- Marlene Specht, MA, CCC-SLP, VA Palo Alto Health Care System:  marlene.specht@va.gov  
  650-493-5000 x67222

- Carey Pawlowski, PhD,  
  Neurorehabilitation Psychologist  
  VA Palo Alto Health Care System  
  carey.pawlowski@va.gov  
  650-493-5000 x67537
References

- Aaron Tull, Ph.D. (Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior at the University of Mississippi Medical Center) and http://www.americasheroesatwork.gov/resources/factsheets/tips/

Also recommend:

- www.americasheroesatwork.gov
Thank you!

Please return to the JAM and join the discussion! Your input is important!