Student Veterans and Traumatic Brain Injury

Traumatic Brain Injury: the Signature Injury of the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

Roughly 1 in 5 returning service members report experiencing a traumatic brain injury during deployment (Rand, 2008).

What is traumatic brain injury?

Traumatic brain injury is a specific type of damage to the brain that results when the head:
- is violently shaken by external force (e.g., concussion, blast injuries, severe whiplash)
- hits a stationary object (e.g., windshield in a car crash)
- is hit (e.g., by assault or by impact from debris)
- is penetrated (e.g., gunshot wound, shrapnel)

Every person with brain injury is different

- Each individual adjusts differently to the changes that result from brain injury.
- Each individual needs differing types and levels of support.

Long term effects of “mild” TBI

- Many individuals with “mild” traumatic brain injury, or concussion, will have no long-term effects.
- A small group may have some longer lasting, or even permanent, symptoms.

Some problems associated with brain injury....

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<tr>
<th>Cognitive</th>
<th>Other Difficulties</th>
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<td>Organizing thoughts, problem solving</td>
<td>Sensitivity to lights and loud noises</td>
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<td>Memory loss</td>
<td>Headaches</td>
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<td>Processing information, retrieving words</td>
<td>Fatigue</td>
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<td>Generalizing and integrating skills</td>
<td>Retaining and retrieving information</td>
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<td>Interacting with others</td>
<td>Impulsivity</td>
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<td>Abstraction and Conceptualization</td>
<td>Easily overloaded or distracted</td>
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<td>Slowed Reaction Time</td>
<td>Depression</td>
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<td>Changed relationships with friends and family</td>
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<td>Chronic Pain</td>
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<td>Misuse of alcohol and drugs</td>
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<td>Stigma</td>
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A student with TBI may:

- need an established routine with step-by-step directions
- need books and lectures on tape
- need extended time on tests and quizzes
- need repetition or some type of reinforcement of class material
- experience memory problems
- need a note-taker or tutor
- have inconsistencies in ability to complete class work
- also be dealing with problems related to post-traumatic stress disorder
What you may see in your classroom

- Student may be uncomfortable around unfamiliar people and in unfamiliar surroundings.
- Student may sit away from windows or in back of class; be reluctant to speak up in class.
- Student may be sensitive to war references, withdrawing or become confrontational when the topic is brought up.
- Student may have difficulty concentrating during class and be easily distracted.
- Student may need increased encouragement and guidance.
- Student may have difficulty dealing with the lack of a structured day and the independence of college life.
- Student may lack organizational skills.
- Student may be reluctant to ask for assistance.

Challenges for student veterans with TBI

- isolation
- may not want to identify publicly as a veteran or as someone with a TBI
- does not know he/she has a TBI, despite problems
- dealing with very new injuries and does not know what needs are in terms of resources and social support
- post injury abilities are very different from pre-injury abilities
- student does not know how to access services at college campus, or that help is available
  - student does not seek help before returning to school – does not plan ahead or prepare
  - has academic problems he/she didn’t expect and is not well prepared to handle them
  - pre-existing conditions may exacerbate the situation (ADHD, learning disabilities)
  - co-occurring PTSD, depression, anxiety, and other psychological/psychiatric issues

Suggestions for faculty and staff

Remember that veterans are a heterogeneous group with a wide-range of capabilities, temperaments and experience.

- Some individuals endure extreme conditions with relatively few negative effects, while others are more sensitive to traumatic events.
- Regardless of your opinion regarding a specific military campaign, veterans deserve recognition and appreciation.
- Include information on class syllabi for student veterans, such as:
  
  “Veterans and active duty military personnel with special circumstances are welcome and encouraged to communicate these, in advance if possible, to the instructor.”

- Understand that veterans may miss class due to VA appointments which can take a long time to reschedule.
- Be aware that military spouses and families with loved ones deployed have challenges of their own.
- Ask veterans what they want. Do they want to be anonymous? How should war references be handled?
- Be aware of referral sources on and off campus.
- Recognize signs of mental or physical stress.

And finally…remember that…

- There can be joy and fulfillment after a brain injury, despite the frustrations and feelings of loss and grief.
- Recovery is a long process and gains can be made when they are least expected.
- Educating the public about brain injury helps to remove the stigma associated with it.
- Preventing isolation of persons with TBI is critical.

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