



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....

Cognitive

Organizing thoughts, problem solving
Memory loss
Processing information, retrieving words
Generalizing and integrating skills
Interacting with others
Abstraction and Conceptualization
Slowed Reaction Time

Other Difficulties

Sensitivity to lights and loud noises
Headaches
Fatigue
Retaining and retrieving information
Impulsivity
Easily overloaded or distracted
Depression
Changed relationships with friends and family
Chronic Pain
Misuse of alcohol and drugs
Stigma

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.

Acknowledgements: Dr. William Burns, North Dakota State University

Dr. Mina Dunnam, Stratton VA Medical Center, Albany, NY

North Carolina State University, reference guide for college students with disabilities, www.ncsu.edu