

INFORMATION & TIPS FOR Veteran Court Teams and Professionals

Justice Involved Veterans Living with Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)



As court teams and professionals, what follows is intended to:

- Provide an overview of the often invisible, yet common disabilities that impact the health, cognitive abilities and behavioral health of justice involved veterans.
- Provide you with a general overview of common injuries to the head, neck and spine, and the impact of those injuries on those who have served our country and find themselves involved with the courts.
- Suggest simple environmental and personalized interventions for veterans who may be living with the physical, thinking and behavioral health consequences of injury to the head, neck and spine that can improve their successful engagement with veteran court services and reduce the likelihood of recidivism and worsening of physical and behavioral health conditions.



Studies tell us that those who have served in the United States Armed Forces are at higher risk of having experienced these kinds of injuries than their same age civilian peers. This is true whether they were based in the United States, Europe, Somalia, Iraq, or Afghanistan.



According to Dr. Mark A. Reger of the VA Puget Sound Health Care System, the more than 2.5 million veterans who served after September 11, 2001, are more likely to experience TBI and related negative challenges to their health and wellbeing than prior generations of veterans.

The good news, according to the Department of Defense, is the majority of TBI's experienced by members of the Armed Forces are mild with most service members returning to full duty for most within 10-14 days.



The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs reports that 1 in 7 individuals living with a SCI in the United States are Veterans and more than 11% of military personnel injured in Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom are living with SCI.

For some who experienced mild TBI or concussion(s) prior to or at the time of their SCI may find they are living with the thinking, mental health and the physical challenges of both conditions that impact their ability to navigate civilian life.



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How are these injuries classified/defined by civilian and military experts?

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) can be mild, this is also referred to as a concussion, moderate, or severe.

In general, the longer an individual experiences challenges to their thinking, emotions, and physical skills, the more severe the injury and longer lasting the consequences.

Many individuals will show no outward sign of their injury or injuries, others may have obvious coordination and communication challenges.

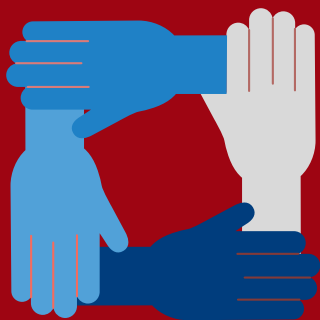
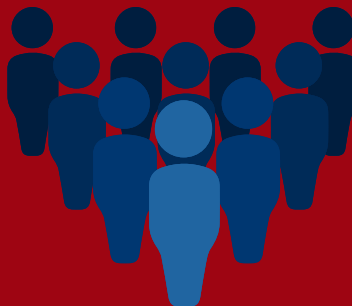
Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) is the result of a disruption of communication between the brain and body, caused by damage to either the spinal cord or surrounding tissue and bones that can result in paralysis, chronic pain, and loss of feeling.

The severity of impact on an individual's ability to control their movement and bodily functions depends on the area of the spinal cord injured.

As a result, some (not necessarily all) individuals living with SCI will use a wheelchair or cane.

Common Causes of Injury to the head, neck and spinal cord include:

- Motor vehicle and motorcycle crashes (on and off base)
- Military Training Accidents
- Fights and Falls
- Recreational and organized sports (rock climbing, soccer)



- Exposure(s) to blast from Improvised Explosive Devices
- Gunshot wound(s)
- Exposure to Overpressure from use of high-powered weapons such as .50 sniper rifle in training or combat



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For those living with a history of injury to the head, neck, and spine the following can interfere with life at home and in the community, often resulting in difficulty getting and keeping a job, being successful in school as well as negatively impacting relationships with family and friends.

Below are common challenges and recommended strategies that can help justice involved veterans cope with injury-related challenges and improve the overall quality of life now and in the future:

Challenges - What you might see or hear

- Trouble remembering what is heard and read, forgetting appointments, or showing up at the wrong time or day
- Blank facial expression in response to a question or request
- Responses are disorganized
- Responses include information that was not requested (e.g., after stating their name, they offer details on who they were named after)
- Repeats responses
- Responses are not in keeping with the known facts
- Is impulsive in words and actions
- Looks depressed, anxious and/or irritable
- There are concerns around problematic use of alcohol and/or other substances that may have contributed to the Veteran's involvement with the justice system.
- Challenges with walking, may use a wheelchair or cane
- Have problems with their vision, they may not be able to make or maintain eye contact, they may be wearing an eyepatch
- Appears to have difficulty with their hearing/wear hearing aids

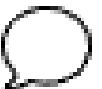


What Might be Contributing to the Challenges and Strategies for Better Understanding and Engagement

Don't assume, unless evidence proves otherwise that the behaviors described are due to the person being stubborn, difficult, or willful. Rather, the person, due to their injuries, *can't* follow through, *can't* pay attention, *thus, cannot*, because of their injury, step up to challenges and expectations even though they *look* capable.

Likewise, don't conclude the Veteran is not motivated to make positive changes in their lives. Encourage them, throughout the Veteran Court process to ask for clarification or paraphrase back in their own words what others have said. Encourage them to ask for extra time to process information. Encourage note taking of important information and to record responses to questions they may have.

Be clear and direct in your feedback. Remind the veteran of the expectations of behavior within the court and when engaging with court personnel. Encourage the Veteran to debrief with their Mentor or other supporter.



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If a veteran is experiencing....



- Attention and concentration difficulties
- Memory problems
- Issues with follow-through
- Difficulty managing their emotions, impulsively saying or doing something that is out of turn or offends others



NOTE: the listed accommodations and strategies can target all, some, or just one of possible challenges named above. They are universal and of assistance to those with or without a history of a brain injury or cognitive impairment. If someone has a memory problem because they can't pay attention to and remember what is being said to them, and then become frustrated, prompting them to say or do something that is disruptive or rude, discussing and personalizing supports in advance will help to disrupt the negative cycle. Using these strategies over time until they become second nature can be invaluable in helping veterans navigate stressful situations.

Possible accommodations and strategies....

- Convey new information/instructions/expectations in a quiet space and check for understanding, e.g. "can you tell me in your own words what we just discussed?"
- Expectations are stated verbally and in a written format, encourage the veteran to take notes in a notebook, phone or device (e.g. record information in their own words and send it to themselves, create calendar reminders etc.)
- Debrief as soon as possible, describe what you observed, ask the veteran how they were feeling at the time and the intention of those words and actions, provide feedback on how their words/behavior was received by others, and develop a plan to eliminate or reduce negative behaviors.
- The plan can include any of the following; create an agreed upon signal or word that the veteran can use when they feel flooded with emotion and may need a break., their supporter uses the agreed upon signal or word when they observe the veteran becoming frustrated or saying or doing something out of bounds., take a break, use a free app for focus and deep breathing such as Breathe2Relax, created for veterans living with anxiety or PTSD.



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With clear expectations provided upfront and throughout the proceedings, disability informed court personnel and Veteran Mentors can support justice involved Veterans engagement in the Veterans Court process and services.

The benefits of this model were underscored following a long-term outcome of veterans engaged with the Veterans Court in Buffalo, New York. Participants experienced:

- Better mental health outcomes
- Successful engagement in drug and alcohol treatment programs, leading to long term sobriety
- Improved relationships with family and friends
- Higher rates of stable housing and employment as well as continuing education
- AND...veterans of the Buffalo Veterans Court did NOT reoffend/cycle back into the criminal justice system



Resources

United States Brain Injury Alliance

<https://usbia.org/>

The United States Brain Injury Alliance aims to build state and national capacity to create a better future alongside individuals affected by brain injury through advocacy, education and information.

Brain Injury Association of America

biausa.org

1-800-444-6443

The Brain Injury Association of America links callers from around the country to local resources



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF STATE HEAD INJURY
ADMINISTRATORS

This project was supported by the
"Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation."

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Resources

National Association of State Head Injury Administrators

nashia.org, NASHIA's efforts are aimed at "assisting state government in promoting partnerships and building systems to meet the needs of individuals with brain injury and their families." NASHIA offers information on a variety of brain injury related topics including domestic violence, employment and veterans for free. NASHIA also has many publications and webcasts on a variety of brain injury related topics.

The Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation

<https://www.christopherreeve.org/>
The Foundation provides information on living with paralysis, how to get support, research advances and connecting with others within the paralysis community, you can search resources specific to where you live here: <https://www.christopherreeve.org/get-support/resources-in-your-area>

Traumatic Brain Injury Center of Excellence (formerly the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center)

<https://tinyurl.com/2rwrek7j>
An online resource from the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center is an initiative designed to promote traumatic brain injury awareness, education, and prevention.

The Air Force Center for Excellence for Medical Multimedia

tbi.cemmlibrary.org
Includes interactive tools related to brain injury, appropriate for individuals with lived experience, their families, and supporters as well as professionals.

The Shepherd Center, Atlanta Georgia

<https://www.spinalinjury101.org/>
The Shepherd Center offers intensive medical treatment and rehabilitation services for individuals living with spinal cord injury and disease, acquired brain injury, multiple sclerosis, chronic pain and other neuromuscular problems.

BrainLine

brainline.org
Website funded through the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center offers civilians, returning service members with brain injury, families, and professionals a variety of information and resources regarding life after brain injury.

