

What Do I Need to Know?



Some Facts

What is Traumatic Brain Injury?

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) happens when something hits the head hard or makes it move quickly. Injuries may be due to blasts in combat, or as a result of motor vehicle accidents, falls, falling or flying objects, or assaults. TBI is called "mild," and may also be referred to as a concussion, when there is a brief change in awareness or consciousness at the time the injury occurs. It is called "moderate" or "severe" when there is a longer period of unconsciousness or amnesia, which means memory loss. The initial injury does not necessarily predict what long-term symptoms an individual may have.

Treatment may include: rehabilitation therapies, exercise and other activities, medication, education and support.

Physical and Mental Changes to Expect

There are some common physical and thinking changes that can occur with TBI depending on the type and severity of the injury. Some symptoms may be present immediately, while others may appear later. The Veteran's symptoms and course of recovery may differ from others with a similar type of injury. One individual may recover with little remaining problems, while others experience symptoms that can last for days, weeks, or sometimes longer. In general, recovery from TBI is slower for older individuals, and for those who have had a previous brain injury. For individuals with a more severe TBI, there may be lifelong changes to or problems with physical, emotional or cognitive (thinking) functioning.

Physical changes may include: problems with vision, weakness and coordination, as well as headaches, dizziness, fatigue, pain, and sleep disturbances.

Thinking changes may include: memory and learning problems, decreased concentration, problems with judgment, and slower thinking.

Emotional issues may include: irritability, problems managing anger or frustration, depression, anxiety, adjustment difficulties, and problems with social functioning.

What Does This Mean for Me?

Family Caregivers play an important role in recovery. In fact, many people who work with TBI patients believe that having a Family Caregiver is one of the most important aids to recovery. You can offer support, encouragement and guidance to your injured family member, and help ensure the treatment plan established by the medical professionals caring for the Veteran is followed.

At times, you may feel overwhelmed, angry or scared. You may also feel alone, or feel worn out by caregiving responsibilities. These reactions are normal and typically come and go. If you feel like there is just too much to deal with, seek help either by confiding in a friend, participating in a support group or consulting a professional mental health practitioner.

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Caregiving Tips

1. It is often difficult for an individual with TBI to multitask, so give one instruction at a time. Try using lists and memory notebooks. A calendar is also a helpful tool to organize daily tasks.
2. Be sensitive to the issue of fatigue. If your family member seems tired or overwhelmed, suggest they take a break.
3. Establish a routine in which your family member pre-plans activities for the day. Scheduling the most important activities for the morning is a good idea, because energy levels tend to decline over the course of the day. Remember that your loved one will have good days and bad days, both emotionally and physically. This is a normal part of recovery.
4. Know what resources are available and reach out to friends, family, and professionals. VA can help you learn about available resources at www.caregiver.va.gov.
5. Attend visits to the medical provider with your family member and provide detailed information about the Veteran's progress and challenges. Ask questions and take notes.
6. Be supportive and patient, but also remember to take care of yourself. If you find yourself completely overwhelmed or you feel yourself "losing it," take a moment and call someone — a friend, a family member, or VA's Caregiver Support Line (1-855-260-3274) are all good places to start. Support groups may also be available in your community or at your local VA.
7. Visit your doctor regularly, and get plenty of rest so you can stay strong. Remember, you are doing the best you can and you are making a difference in your loved one's life.

More information on TBI and caregiving can be found at www.polytrauma.va.gov. An additional resource, *Traumatic Brain Injury: A Guide for Caregivers of Service Members and Veterans* can be found at www.traumaticbraininjuryatoz.org. If you are the Family Caregiver of a Veteran who has sustained a moderate or severe TBI, contact fcp@dvbic.org for information on obtaining a copy of the guide.



I have more questions. Where can I go for help?

VA knows that being a Caregiver can be both rewarding and hard. You can always find more information at www.caregiver.va.gov, including contact information for the VA Caregiver Support Coordinator nearest you.

You can also call VA's Caregiver Support Line
toll-free at 1-855-260-3274.

The Caregiver Support Line is open
Monday through Friday, 8:00 am – 11:00 pm ET,
and Saturday, 10:30 am – 6:00 pm ET.

Call to talk to caring professionals who can:

- Tell you about the assistance available from VA.
- Help you access services and benefits.
- Connect you with your local Caregiver Support Coordinator at a VA Medical Center near you.
- Just listen, if that's what you need right now.