

Traumatic Brain Injury Facts:

Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Services

◆ ***What is Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)?***

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) (cranio-cerebral head trauma) is an injury to the head arising from blunt or penetrating trauma or from acceleration-deceleration forces. This injury is associated with any of the following symptoms or signs: decreased level of consciousness, amnesia, other neurologic or neuropsychologic abnormalities, skull fracture, diagnosed intracranial lesions, or death.¹

Individuals with TBI can display a wide variety of functional impairments. The brain is so complex that each TBI has different consequences, and each person with TBI must adjust differently. The variation in consequences among individuals with TBI makes the role of the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) counselor extremely important in finding ways to improve the life of a person with TBI. Often, the VR counselor is the only counselor an individual with TBI will see. Today, more than ever before, individuals with TBI are achieving employment and independent living by working with informed, skilled VR counselors.

The list of possible consequences of TBI can be intimidating. Fortunately, most individuals show only a small subset of the wide range of potential functional issues. As with other disabilities, everything depends on the specific impact of each individual's TBI. The most common consequences a VR counselor might encounter with an individual having TBI are:

Cognitive Problems, which include difficulty with short-term memory, judgment, concentration, processing new information, distraction, sequencing, sensory overload, or language abilities.

Perceptual Problems, which include difficulty with vision, hearing, touch, time and space orientation, balance, or increased pain sensitivity.

Physical Problems, which include difficulty with motor and physical skills, endurance/fatigue, speech, persistent headaches, photosensitivity, hemiplegia, or seizures.

Behavioral/Emotional Problems, which include irritability, impatience, impulse control, stress, reading social cues, dependence/independence, initiation, self-awareness, mood swings, or personality changes.

Psychiatric Problems, which include depression, suicidal thoughts, auditory/visual hallucinations, or paranoia.

In addition to these specific issues, TBI can have secondary consequences for individuals. They may become easily confused and frustrated trying to understand "what" services are available from "which" agencies, causing them to give up on some or all services. Others may have problems with "disruptive" behavior. Frequently, disruptive behavior is the result of fatigue and stimulus overload, which are common with mild TBI. Persons with TBI may not be good at self monitoring and pacing, therefore, it is important that VR counselors be vigilant taking into account accommodations for fatigue.

◆ ***TBI and Employment***

Historically it has been found that 75% of persons with TBI who return to work will lose their job within 90 days if they do not have supports. Even after an individual with a TBI is successfully employed through VR services, he or she may later need help from VR when adapting to changes in job or life situations. Parente, Stapleton, & Wheatley (1991) found three common reasons individuals with TBI return to VR:

¹ Thurman DJ, Sniezek JE, Johnson D, Greenspan A, Smith SM. *Guidelines for Surveillance of Central Nervous System Injury*. Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1994.

Loss of Support System: Individuals with TBI often attend support or peer groups during rehabilitation. However, these groups usually focus on recovery and adjustment, not on employment and independent living. Without a continued support system, job retention may be a challenge.

Change of Job Duties: Job duties may change, managers may change, and/or job expectations may change, requiring re-examination of accommodations and strategies.

Upward Mobility: With successful job performance, the individual may be promoted to new responsibilities and challenges, requiring re-examination.

◆ Job Supports

There are a variety of job-site strategies people with TBI use to return to work. These strategies include:

- Job coaching, supported employment
- Schedule-reminders, including telephone, pager, alarm clock
- Scheduled rest breaks to prevent stimulus overload and fatigue
- Work task checklist on a clipboard
- Tape recorder as a memory aid
- Stop watch for time management
- Frequent, scheduled site visits by job coach
- Supportive phone calls after work
- Job coach available by pager
- Role playing of job situations
- Periodic evaluation form completed by supervisor, job coach
- Job-site accommodations
- Adaptive technology, including handheld and notebook computers
- Job sharing with another individual
- Mentoring by a co-worker or retired worker

It is recognized that a supportive group of friends, family, service coordinators, and others can help with independent living and vocational issues.

◆ Job Characteristics

Individuals with TBI are finding jobs in a variety of settings, including high technology, scientific laboratories, self-employment, and government agencies. However, jobs with the following features have greater success:

- Regular daily schedules
- Routine tasks
- Low levels of distracting noise and light (fluorescent lights may be especially distracting)
- Limited number of co-workers and social contacts in a work day
- Regular breaks
- Access to memory aids

◆ Ways for VRs to Improve Job Retention

- **Build a rehabilitation team** that includes a job coach, a case manager or service coordinator, and members of the pre-placement therapy treatment team. The rehabilitation team should meet regularly.
- **Train job coaches** for managing job crises, communicating job needs to rehabilitation team, and quickly implementing proposed solutions from the team.
- **Provide an appropriate support group** for the individual, with a balance between topic presentations and participant interaction.

For more information on TBI and links to other resources, visit the website of the National Association of State Head Injury Administrators at www.nashia.org or contact NASHIA at 98 Corporate Lake Drive, Columbia, Missouri 65203, telephone (573) 882-3807. This fact sheet was completed in cooperation with The Council of State Administrators of Vocational Rehabilitation.