



Start the Conversation: *Information for Veterans Dealing With the Effects of a Traumatic Brain Injury*

Traumatic brain injury (TBI) is caused by a blow or jolt to the head that affects normal brain functioning. It can result from hitting the windshield in a car accident, an impact from a fall, a collision while playing sports, or a blast wave from a nearby explosion in a combat zone.

Whatever the cause, TBI can impair an individual's ability to think, control emotions, move fluidly, or speak, and may also affect sight or hearing. It is essential to see a doctor after a head injury occurs or when signs and symptoms of TBI appear.

UNTREATED TBI CAN AFFECT MENTAL HEALTH

TBI affects people in many different ways, and symptoms may change over time. Some TBI symptoms are immediately apparent following the impact, while others are slow to develop or may be confused with other conditions.

If you experience any of the following symptoms for more than seven days after a head injury, it is important to seek treatment:

- ▶ Feeling tired all the time
- ▶ Feeling sad or anxious
- ▶ Getting frustrated or overwhelmed easily
- ▶ Sleeping much more or less than usual
- ▶ Frequently feeling irritated or angry for most of the day
- ▶ Acting impulsively—without thinking things through
- ▶ Having trouble concentrating, remembering, or focusing on tasks
- ▶ Not feeling like yourself

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF MY TBI BEGINS TO AFFECT MY EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING?

If left untreated, the effects of TBI can affect the way you live your life and your personal relationships. Ignoring your symptoms and trying to "tough it out" may affect your well-being and mental health.



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Some people with TBI begin to have distressing thoughts or no longer feel like themselves. Though not all distressing thoughts and emotions lead to a crisis, if left unchecked, they could become a serious issue over time.

Learn to recognize these warning signs of a mental health crisis. If you notice any of the following, get help immediately or encourage your Veteran to do so:

- ▶ Engaging in self-destructive behavior, such as drug abuse or reckless use of weapons
- ▶ Thinking about hurting or killing oneself
- ▶ Looking for ways or having a set plan in place to kill oneself
- ▶ Talking about death, dying, or suicide
- ▶ Saying final goodbyes to friends and family
- ▶ Putting personal affairs in order or giving away possessions

TBI CAN BE SUCCESSFULLY TREATED

Many Veterans receive effective treatment for TBI. During a TBI evaluation, you and your doctor will discuss what caused your injury. You may also talk about how to deal with TBI's physical, cognitive (e.g., concentration difficulties, headaches), and behavioral symptoms and other impacts on your daily life.

Your doctor may recommend counseling to help you learn ways to manage the effects of TBI. Because TBI is a brain injury, medication may help relieve its effects on how the brain functions.

Most doctors who treat head injuries agree that recovery is faster if you understand what is happening, get enough rest, and resume your responsibilities at your own pace. Don't push yourself too hard. After sustaining a TBI, gradually increase your activity level, and consider whether or not some activities make your symptoms worse.

There are also steps you can take to help manage your TBI symptoms:

- ▶ Get enough sleep
- ▶ Write things down, or use electronic reminders, if you have trouble remembering
- ▶ Establish a regular daily routine
- ▶ Avoid alcohol, which can slow down the healing process and make symptoms worse
- ▶ Avoid caffeine, cold medications that treat nasal congestion, or other products that contain pseudoephedrine, which may increase TBI symptoms
- ▶ Recognize triggers and keep a record to help identify situations that are more likely to worsen your symptoms
- ▶ Talk to others to keep you from feeling isolated and to give friends and loved ones a chance to help you

It's important that you talk to someone right away if you have thoughts of harming yourself, death, or suicide. You can always contact the **Veterans Crisis Line** by calling **1-800-273-8255 PRESS 1**, using the online chat, or **texting to 838255**. These services provide free, **confidential support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year**.

For additional information and resources to help a Veteran you're concerned about, visit *Start the Conversation: New Tools for Veteran Suicide Prevention* at www.VeteransCrisisLine.net/starttheconversation