

# INFORMATION & TIPS FOR Veteran Court Mentors Supporting Justice Involved Veterans Living with Spinal Cord Injury (SCI) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

As a Mentor to a justice involved Veteran, what follows is intended to:

- 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 ways you can support mentees 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 ultimately with their communities.



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 physical challenges common in 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. below the site of the injury

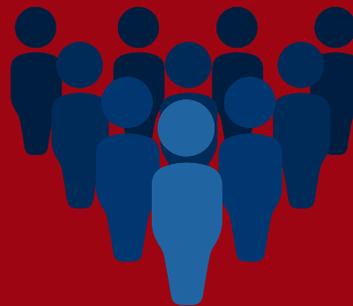
The severity of impact on an individual's ability to control their movement and bodily functions depends on the area of the spinal cord injured.

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



# INFORMATION & TIPS FOR Veteran Court Mentors Cont'd

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



Trouble remembering what is heard and read, forgetting appointments, or showing up at the wrong time or day.



Trouble paying attention, often finding themselves easily distracted, in conversations, at work or school. Often those around them interpret this behavior as disrespectful, not interested or unmotivated to get involved in services or treatments that are there to help them.



You observe careless, impulsive behavior, the individual may, do or say something before thinking through the consequences.

## Supports and Solutions



Encourage your mentee to write it down on paper, on your phone or other device, use a calendar and journal, add alerts to their phone or device.



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, *cannot*, because of their injury, step up even though they *look* capable. Rather than dismiss them as 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.



If possible, as soon as it is practical, debrief the situation, generate other ways it could have been handled and why.



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## Challenges



You suspect (or) the Veteran admits to feeling depressed, anxious, and/or irritable. The individual may be relieving stressful or traumatic memories and events. They are having difficulty falling or staying asleep.

You suspect problematic use of alcohol and/or other substances that may be contributing to their problems or is a factor in why they are involved with the court.



They are experiencing headaches or pain; balance and coordination are a challenge or have gotten worse

They are experiencing difficulties with their vision or hearing

## Supports and Solutions



Encourage the Veteran to talk to you, a trusted friend or family member. If these feelings and behaviors persist or get worse, explore with the veteran professional resources such as speaking to their health care provider, contacting the local Veteran Services organization or hospital, contact the VA crisis hotline (call: 1.800.273.8255-Text: 838255). You can offer to help them jot down their thoughts and questions before seeking help. Having something to focus on will help lower anxiety and ensure that they share all their concerns with the professional.

For anyone having difficulties with their thinking, planning and memory, this is a quick guide of common challenges and easy ways to improve meeting everyday responsibilities and challenges:  
<https://tinyurl.com/2p8dwmd8>.



Encourage them to speak to their healthcare provider, if they don't have one, help them to identify a provider, as above, suggest they organize their thoughts and questions before they go to their appointment.



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Discuss with the Veteran you are supporting the reasons why they have been referred to a veteran's specialty court. Speak honestly from your own experiences, the good as well as the difficult and challenging. Let them know there is evidence, beyond the personal experience of vets such as yourself, of the benefits of going through the veteran court.

For example, according to a follow-up study of veterans involved with the Buffalo New York Veterans' Court, 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](http://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](http://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.

### 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 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.

### 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>

### The Air Force Center for Excellence for Medical Multimedia

[tbi.cemmlibrary.org](http://tbi.cemmlibrary.org)

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

### BrainLine

[brainline.org](http://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.

