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### **Brain Injury and Neuropsych Recovery: Creating a New Normal**

Last week we looked at how the psychological impact of a work-related injury can affect the physical recovery process of an injured worker. In a best-case scenario, with proper treatment, life would eventually regain a sense of normalcy. But for some, like those dealing with a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), the effects can be life-altering, not only for the employee, but also for their loved ones. For these people, recovery may require *creating* a new normal.

#### **What is a Traumatic Brain Injury?**

A Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is an injury where there is damage to the brain because of an external blow to the head. According to the [Indiana Workers' Compensation Information Portal](#), the effects of a TBI may not be evident immediately because the side effects vary from person to person. Such an injury can affect cognitive, physical and psychological skills often requiring life-long medical and psychological care. Predicting a level of recovery from a brain injury is difficult, but the [SC Department of Disabilities & Special Needs](#) describes the recovery from brain injury, that happens in stages. "The first stage includes intensive, lifesaving medical and technical procedures which occur in an acute care facility immediately following the trauma. After the acute care stage, the challenge of recovery then shifts to focus on the remaining stages of: physical, occupational and neuropsychological restoration." Most people are familiar with physical and occupational therapy however, neuropsychology probably warrants some explanation.

The [Brain Therapy Center](#), in Westlake Village, CA, offers this definition. "Neuropsychological assessment is an evaluation of cognition (thought processes), mood, personality, and behavior that is conducted by licensed clinical neuropsychologists (clinical psychologists who are specialists in brain-behavior relationships)". This assessment may help with providing important information regarding the effects of the injury on a person's life and family, the everyday functioning and the ability to return to work and function effectively in the future.

According to the [Brain Injury Association of Indiana \(BIA\)](#), a neuropsychologist will review the case history, the hospital records, conduct tests, spend hours interviewing "the individual and his/her family" (in other words acquire information about the 'person' the individual was before the injury i.e., school performance, habits, and lifestyle).

Believing the neuropsychological assessment explains how damage in the brain affects the way an individual thinks and acts and deals with life in general, the [BIA](#) points out that if

the evaluation is performed while the individual is in an active rehabilitation program, it can be used as a basis for formation of a treatment plan. Additionally, learning **who** the person was **before** the injury (while an important part of the neuropsychological evaluation) is also where one may have to confront the reality that that person may never be entirely the same again.

### **Back to Work...Back to Normalcy?**

So where does this leave the injured worker and employer? Returning to work is often the biggest challenge after TBI, many times due to the physical, cognitive and emotional symptoms that can get in the way of meeting work demands. For example, trouble focusing and memory problems may make it harder to learn new things; or fatigue may limit an individual's ability to handle work demands. A group promoting and supporting workplace success for returning service members with TBI, [American Heroes at Work](#), believes employers can play a vital role in the success of individuals returning to work by recognizing the possible challenges and adjusting accordingly. Employers may need to recognize that not all TBI patients require special accommodations, but asking some of the following questions may help with workplace success.

- What limitations is the employee with TBI experiencing, and how do these limitations affect the employee's job performance?
- What specific job tasks are problematic as a result of these limitations?
- What accommodations are available to reduce or eliminate these problems?
- Has the employee with TBI been consulted regarding possible accommodations?
- Do supervisory personnel and employees need training regarding TBI?

Source: [American Heroes at Work](#)

As families, we frequently have a plan for emergencies. We plan escape routes in case of fire. We stock up on water and supplies if a big storm threatens. But serious injury is a life emergency that is not easily planned for or dealt with. There isn't a manual for creating a new normal". Employers can work with all involved with a work comp case to ensure best practices are followed in returning an employee to work after a TBI.

American Heroes at Work

<http://www.americasheroesatwork.gov/forEmployers/factsheets/accommodatingTBI/>

Brain Injury Association of America

[http://www.biausa.org/literature/51031/Family News and Views Neuropsychological Assessment](http://www.biausa.org/literature/51031/Family%20News%20and%20Views%20Neuropsychological%20Assessment)

Brain Injury Association of Indiana

<http://www.biausa.org/about-brain-injury.htm>

Brain Therapy Center

[http://www.brain-injury-therapy.com/services/neuropsychological\\_testing.htm](http://www.brain-injury-therapy.com/services/neuropsychological_testing.htm)

Indiana Workers' Compensation Information Portal

<http://www.workerscompindiana.com/common-workplace-injuries/>

SC Department of Disabilities & Special Needs

<http://ddsn.sc.gov/providers/publications/Documents/HeadInjuryfamilyguide.pdf>