



# ADDRESSING FAMILY NEEDS

## A Guide for Caregivers of Service Members and Veterans

Traumatic Brain Injury Center of Excellence



A TBI in the family can present challenges to the entire family unit, often requiring everyone's roles and responsibilities to shift. Learning to manage change can be difficult, but it can be done. It is important to work together to build on your family's strengths to help cope with these challenges

### HOW CAN I BUILD STRONGER FAMILY TIES?

**Set aside weekly fun time.** This can help move the focus away from TBI. Try activities that everyone can play a role in and enjoy, such as playing board games, taking a walk or run, or baking cookies. Your goal is to interact with each other during this time, so turn off any distractions such as television, cell phone, or email.

**Have family meetings.** Use this time to discuss family schedules and routines, such as medical appointments or after school activities. This time can also provide opportunity for your family members to express their feelings.

**Schedule one-on-one time with each family member.** Children need to have time alone with their parents to help them feel heard and appreciated. Plan an activity with each child—a shopping trip, movie, story time—and schedule it on a regular basis.

**Encourage children to play simple games with their injured parent.** Choose games that can help them practice skills to assist in recovery.

**Maintain family customs and traditions.** Make an effort to observe important family events. You may have to simplify more elaborate celebrations, but making the effort can mean a lot to your family.

### WHAT CHALLENGES MAY AFFECT MY FAMILY AFTER TBI?

#### Substance Misuse

Some people with TBI turn to alcohol or other substances to help them cope with the effects of their injury. This coping strategy can be harmful. After a TBI, their brain is more vulnerable to the effects of alcohol and drugs, causing them to feel these effects more quickly. Substance misuse can also slow down the recovery process.

PRODUCED BY THE DEFENSE HEALTH AGENCY

Released June 2012 | Revised May 2022 by the Traumatic Brain Injury Center of Excellence

This product is reviewed annually and is current until superseded. 800-870-9244 • Health.mil/TBICoE

Do you have questions about this fact sheet? Feedback? Email [dha.TBICoEinfo@mail.mil](mailto:dha.TBICoEinfo@mail.mil)

## Substance Misuse (Continued)

### How can I help?

**Talk with them about their readiness to change drinking or drug use.** Help your family member make a list of pros and cons of using these substances.

**Minimize time with those who are not supportive.** Spend time with family and friends who are supportive of your loved one not using substances. Explore new social circles or environments that do not involve drinking.

**Avoid high-risk situations.** Don't go to places or visit people that your family member associates with drinking or using drugs. Remove alcohol and other dangerous substances from the home.

## Psychological and Emotional Trauma

Your loved one may have experienced a trauma when the TBI occurred or may have had a traumatic experience during the early stages of recovery. Some common responses include nightmares, anxiety, anger, strong reaction to minor annoyances and continually thinking about the event. For most people, these are normal expected responses and generally lessen with time. In some cases, these responses continue for longer periods of time and can interfere with everyday life.

### How can I help?

**Educate yourself about trauma reactions.** This can provide clarity to why there has been sudden changes in your loved one's behavior.

**Pay close attention to your family member's actions and attitudes.** If they have any of the common symptoms mentioned above, encourage them to seek help. Refer to TBICoE's [concussion and PTSD](#) and [changes in behavior personality or mood](#) fact sheets for details.

**Recognize the triggers in your family member.** This may require you to change your normal routines. Avoid forcing your family member into activities in which they do not want to participate.

**Develop a coping plan.** Discuss what to do when your family member finds themselves in a tempting situation. Ideas can include promptly leaving or calling a friend for support.

**Encourage learning new ways to deal with stress.** Meditation, physical exercise and engaging in hobbies can all be helpful.

**Encourage use of support systems to help avoid a relapse.** If your service member or veteran has recently quit using substances, talk openly about the probability of them using again. Stress that one "slip" doesn't need to mean returning to regular use.

**Locate a local substance support group or treatment program.** Your health care team can connect you to the appropriate resources.

### Develop a plan to manage frustration or anger.

Encourage your family member to communicate when they are becoming angry or frustrated. Calmly listen when your loved one wants to share their feelings or experiences, and ask them how you can help.

### Provide a consistent, structured environment.

Simplify tasks and try to avoid surprises. Respond to difficult behaviors consistently.

### Seek professional help if you notice mood or behavioral changes.

Your health care team can develop a plan to manage these behaviors, ease the effects of trauma reaction, and reinforce effective strategies.

## CRISIS RESOURCES

**Tell someone if you are thinking about killing or hurting yourself. Reach out to your spouse, friend, fellow service member or health care provider to get help or call 911.**

Call the Military/Veterans Crisis Line: 800-273-TALK (8255), send a text to 838255 or chat online at [veteranscrisisline.net](http://veteranscrisisline.net) or contact Military OneSource at: 800-342-9647 or [MilitaryOneSource.mil](http://MilitaryOneSource.mil).

## Financial Changes

A TBI in the family can affect your financial health. Federal, state, local, and non-government resources are available. One place you can start your search is The [National Resource Directory \(NRD\)](#), a database with more than 10,000 resources to support recovery, rehabilitation, and reintegration for service members, veterans, family members, and caregivers. To find the most relevant resources, filter your search to financial information and assistance for family and caregivers.



For more information and resources, refer to TBICoE's [Traumatic Brain Injury:](#)

[A Guide for Caregivers of Service Members and Veterans.](#)