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U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Veterans Health Administration
Office of Rural Health

3.3 Support and Barriers to Access Healthcare for Traumatic Brain Injuries

Authors

Stacy M. Phillips, MSW

Maria M. Rossi, PhD

Jon Parker, MAMFT, NCC, LPC, LMHC

Heidi Radunovich, PhD, Licensed Psychologist

Michelle A. Parisi, PhD RDN

Traumatic Brain Injury Support

Since 2007, the VA implemented mandatory traumatic brain injury (TBI) screening for all Veterans who had served in combat operations and were separated from active-duty service after September 11, 2001. A positive screen only indicates the need for further evaluation for possible TBI (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2015).

Veterans who screen positive with the TBI screening tool can get a comprehensive TBI Evaluation with a specialty provider who can determine whether the veteran has suffered a TBI. Other rehabilitation team members, such as social workers, physical and occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, psychologists, and others, may be involved in the comprehensive evaluation to help determine the rehabilitation treatments (Figure 3.3a).

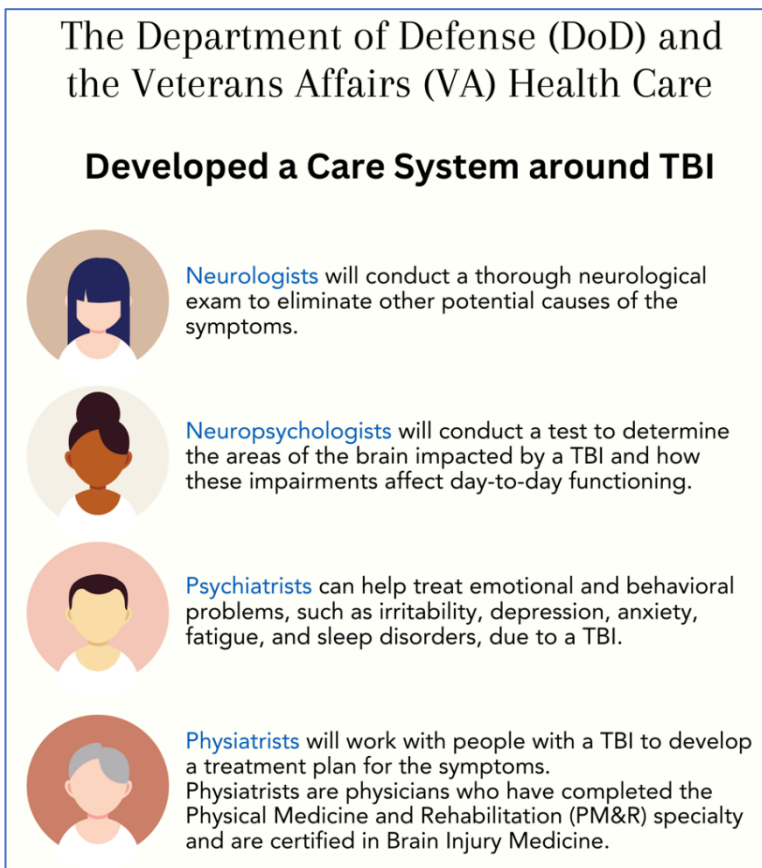


Figure 3.3a

Care System Around a Traumatic Brain Injury

Source

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2021, Dec 15th.

Depending on their healthcare needs, Veterans with a TBI can receive treatment through their local VA Medical Center or seek treatment at one of the specialized rehabilitation programs in the VA Polytrauma System (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2021).

Unfortunately, the complexity of the military healthcare system can present a challenge to accessing needed services. General resources for service members and families include individual, family, or couples counseling, community organizations, and rotating family members that provide support.

VA Mental health services can be accessed using a virtual platform with a computer or mobile device from the veteran's home, or they can be accessed at a local VA facility. Veterans can send a secured message to their healthcare team on the [My Health VA Portal: \(myhealth.va.gov\)](https://myhealth.va.gov)

Additionally, online specialized rehabilitation services are also available to the veteran. These include physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech-language pathology, kinesiotherapy, recreational and creative arts therapies, assistive technology, physiatry, and other medical specialties. VA virtual care also expands access to TBI evaluations and specialized, comprehensive programming addressing TBI and comorbid conditions (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2021).

Barriers to Accessing or Seeking Support

Barriers to accessing rehabilitation services can significantly impact the rate and outcome of an individual's recovery following a TBI. There are two types of challenges: they can be intrinsic (internal), or they can be extrinsic (external).

Internal and external factors affecting access to healthcare



When accessing care, Veterans may have a general lack of knowledge about where to get services or face long wait times, there may be a large geographic distance between their residence and the healthcare facilities, they may have difficulties scheduling appointments, and the available healthcare may be of poor quality (extrinsic barriers) (Figure 3.3b).

The veteran may face family barriers when accessing care, such as unmet family/spousal needs and caregiver burnout, as well as family members needing their own care (e.g., physical, counseling, or emotional support) to handle the impact of the veteran's TBI.

Figure 3.3b
Internal and External Factors Affecting Access to Healthcare

Source
National Guidelines Alliance, 2022

For Veterans in rural areas, they may face rural-specific health disparities and barriers to care. There can be insufficient transportation and social services. Lower private insurance rates and access to specialty care, including mental health services. Due to their rural location, Veterans in rural communities may not live close enough to a VA facility to access many services, and they

may not have access to broadband internet to connect with them remotely. Additionally, not every veteran is enrolled in the VA healthcare system. Leveraging community-based resources has become a priority for the Veterans Health Administration, but many areas do not have resources available. Specifically, the specialty services needed to manage TBI care are frequently unavailable in rural areas (National Guidance Alliance, 2022).

References

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