



# SERVICE-CONNECTED INJURIES AND REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS

**Advances in military medicine and protective equipment have increased the number of service members surviving the injuries they sustained on the battlefield.** However, the changing combat landscape has created a shift in the type and range of injuries experienced. While the media has done a terrific job in opening the public's eyes to injuries such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI), the reality is that rehabilitation and recovery from any wound or injury incurred during military service, either visible or unseen, is a very personal journey for each and every wounded service member.

In order to eliminate stigma and misconception, it is important that employers have a basic understanding of some of the more frequently recorded combat-related injuries experienced by today's service members. Although no two warriors living with one or more acquired injuries will experience the same functional limitation(s) or need for accommodation, what follows are some suggestions that may lead to a more informed and productive workforce.

**POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)** is a psychological health injury — and a purely human reaction to trauma or an extreme traumatic event. Anyone who has experienced a life-threatening event can, *but will not necessarily*, develop PTSD. These events may include combat or military exposure, child sexual or physical abuse, terrorist attacks, sexual or physical assault, serious accidents (such as car wrecks), or natural disasters (such as fire, tornado, hurricane, flood, or earthquake).

**TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY (TBI)** is defined as a blow or jolt to the head or a penetrating head injury that disrupts the function of the brain. Not all blows or jolts to the head result in a TBI. The severity of such an injury may range from mild/concussion (i.e., a brief change in mental status or consciousness) to "severe," (i.e., an extended period of unconsciousness or amnesia after the injury). A TBI can result in short- or long-term problems, although most people with TBI are able to function independently.

While PTSD and TBI are very different injuries, many of the functional limitations associated with both tend to be similar. Fortunately, many of the accommodations often found helpful are easy to implement, low or no cost, and typically involve simple, good-management practices.

## SAMPLE ACCOMMODATIONS FOR PTSD

- Use a daily or weekly task list
- Reduce distractions in the work environment
- Allow the employee to listen to music using a headset
- Divide large assignments into smaller, goal-oriented tasks or steps
- Assign a supervisor, manager, or mentor to answer the employee's questions
- Allow telephone calls during work hours to doctors and others for needed support
- Allow for a flexible start time or end time, or work from home
- Allow time off for counseling and medical appointments

## SAMPLE ACCOMMODATIONS FOR TBI

- Permit flexible scheduling, allow longer or more frequent work breaks
- Provide additional time to learn new responsibilities
- Provide for job-sharing opportunities
- Encourage the employee to use daily "to-do" lists and check items off as they are completed
- Use technology or special calendars to mark meetings and deadlines
- Assign a mentor to assist in determining goals and providing daily guidance
- Provide written as well as verbal instructions

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- ★ **TO BEGIN THE DISCUSSION.**

**PHYSICAL COMBAT-RELATED INJURIES** may include, but are not limited to, spinal-cord injuries, bone fractures, back injuries, and loss of limb.

The functional limitations experienced by those living with physical injuries are likely to change over time and, therefore, may require a series of accommodations. It is important for the warrior-employee and supervisor to commit to an accommodation follow-up plan.

**SENSORY IMPAIRMENTS** such as those related to vision and hearing are often associated with time in combat. Sensory impairments may present as, but will not be limited to, functional limitations related to low vision, blindness, hearing loss, or deafness. Accommodations for sensory impairments will certainly vary, but may focus on access to technology, documentation, and the need for support services.

**SEVERE BURNS** may not be a “typical” injury for which one might think accommodations would be necessary, but functional limitations associated with fine or gross motor skills, sensitivity to temperature, handling stress and emotions, and issues related to sleep disorders are not atypical for those with burn injuries, and may require accommodation.

### **THE REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS PROCESS: BE A PROACTIVE AND INFORMED EMPLOYER**

**Create** a process for requesting job accommodations that lets all current and prospective employees know your company is committed to equal access and opportunity. Ensuring this information is made available in multiple formats is a great step toward creating a more inclusive and universally accessible workplace — and one in which the majority of your employees will excel.

**Establish** and make known this process for requesting accommodations, at every point in the employment process — from application to onboarding to retention and promotion. It is good management practice to inform all new hires, regardless of injury, disability, or perceived need, of the process for requesting accommodations at every point in the employment process.

**Understand** that one of the biggest challenges faced by those experiencing the impact of a non-apparent disability is whether or not to disclose this information to a prospective or current employer. Many wounded service members are concerned disclosing such information will have negative consequences on their career.

People are now working longer. An aging workforce is more likely to acquire a disability and need accommodations to continue to be productive. By making known the process for requesting and accessing workplace accommodations, and being upfront and transparent with this process, employers will help alleviate stress, creating a more productive workplace.

### **QUESTIONS TO ASK DURING THE REASONABLE-ACCOMMODATIONS PROCESS**

1. What limitations is the employee experiencing?
2. How do these limitations impact the employee and his/her job performance?
3. What specific job tasks are problematic as a result of these limitations?
4. What accommodations are available to reduce or eliminate these problems? Are all potential resources being used to determine possible accommodations?
5. Has the employee been consulted regarding possible accommodations?
6. Once accommodations are in place, would it be useful to meet with the wounded service member to evaluate the effectiveness of the accommodations and to determine whether additional accommodations are needed?
7. Do supervisory personnel and employees need disability-related education and training?

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The Wounded Warrior Project® (WWP) Warriors to Work® program is here to help you as you consider hiring wounded veterans who look forward to contributing to your company.

WWP can support your company in becoming a preferred employer, providing reasonable accommodations and facilitating a productive and long-lasting relationship once the wounded veteran begins work — and continuing through the life cycle of employment.



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