



AMERICA'S HEROES AT WORK

SUPPORTING THE EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS OF
RETURNING SERVICE MEMBERS WITH TBI & PTSD

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Tips for Communicating with People with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) & Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Not everyone has experience communicating with people with disabilities. However, it should not be intimidating. Appropriate etiquette when interacting with people with disabilities is based primarily on respect and courtesy.

Listed below are some general suggestions for communicating with people with disabilities, as well as things to keep in mind when interacting with those with combat-related conditions such as Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These tips can apply both inside and outside of the workplace to veterans and non-veterans alike.

GENERAL TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

- When introduced to a person with a disability, it is appropriate to offer to shake hands. People with limited hand use or who wear an artificial limb can usually shake hands. (Shaking hands with the left hand is an acceptable greeting.)
- If you offer assistance to the person, wait until the offer is accepted. Then listen to or ask for instructions.
- Treat adults as adults. Address people who have disabilities by their first names only when extending the same familiarity to all others.
- Relax. Don't be embarrassed if you happen to use common expressions such as "See you later," or "Did you hear about that?" that seem to relate to a person's disability.
- Don't be afraid to ask questions when you're unsure of what to do

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH TBI

(Note: Many people who have TBI don't need any assistance.)

- Some people with TBI may have trouble concentrating or

organizing their thoughts. If you are in a public area with many distractions, consider moving to a quiet or private location, and try focusing on short-term goals.

- Be prepared to repeat what you say, orally or in writing. Some people with TBI may have short-term memory deficits.
- If you are not sure whether the person understands you, offer assistance completing forms or understanding written instructions and provide extra time for decision-making. Wait for the individual to accept the offer of assistance; do not "over-assist" or be patronizing.
- Be patient, flexible and supportive. Take time to understand the individual, make sure the individual understands you and avoid interrupting the person.

TIPS FOR COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH PTSD

(Note: Many people who have PTSD don't need any assistance.)

- Stress can sometimes affect a person's behavior or work performance. Do your best to minimize high pressure situations.

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- People experience trauma differently and will have their own various coping and healing mechanisms, so treat each person as an individual. Ask what will make him or her most comfortable and respect his or her needs.
- Be tolerant if the person repeats his or her stories and experiences, and avoid interrupting the person.
- In a crisis, remain calm, be supportive and remember that the effects of PTSD are normal reactions to an abnormal situation. Ask how you can help the person, and find out if there is a support person you can contact (such as a family member or your company's Employee Assistance Program). If appropriate, you might ask if the person has medication that he or she needs to take.

REMEMBER:

- Relax.
- Treat the individual with dignity, respect and courtesy.
- Listen to the individual.
- Offer assistance but do not insist or be offended if your offer is not accepted.
- Don't be afraid to say "I don't know," or "Let me check." You can be clear about the limits of your authority or ability to respond to a person's needs or requests.
- Be mindful that symptoms of TBI and PTSD may fluctuate and are influenced by many factors – there may be periods of ease and comfort as well as more challenging times.
- Support, patience and understanding go a long way. Be generous with these.

THE WORDS WE USE

Positive language empowers. When writing or speaking about people with disabilities or combat-related injuries, it is important to put the person first. Group designations such as "the blind," "the retarded" or "the disabled" are inappropriate because they do not reflect the individuality, equality

or dignity of people with disabilities. Further, words like "normal person" imply that the person with a disability isn't normal, whereas "person without a disability" is descriptive but not negative. The accompanying chart shows examples of positive and negative phrases.

Affirmative Phrases

- Person who has a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)
- Person who has Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- Person with an intellectual, cognitive, developmental disability
- Person with a psychiatric disability
- Person who is blind, person who is visually impaired
- Person with a disability
- Person who is deaf
- Person who is hard of hearing
- Person with epilepsy, person with seizure disorder
- Person who uses a wheelchair
- Person with a physical disability, physically disabled
- Unable to speak, uses synthetic speech
- Person who is successful, productive

Negative Phrases

- A victim of TBI
- Afflicted by PTSD
- Retarded; mentally defective
- Crazy; nuts
- The blind
- The disabled; handicapped
- The deaf; deaf and dumb
- Suffers a hearing loss
- epileptic
- Confined or restricted to a wheelchair
- Crippled; lame; deformed
- Dumb; mute
- Has overcome his/her disability; is courageous (when it implies the person has courage because of having a disability)

This fact sheet was developed in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Labor's (DOL) Office of Disability Employment Policy, the Job Accommodation Network, the Veterans' Employment and Training Service, the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury, and the Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center.

