

Traumatic Brain Injury for VR Counselors

Margaret A. Struchen, Ph.D. and Laura M. Ritter, Ph.D., M.P.H.

Training Session 2c: Cognitive Changes that May Occur Following TBI, Impact on Vocational Issues, and Strategies to Address these Changes.

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Attention/Concentration (Mild, Moderate/Severe):

One of the more common difficulties experienced after TBI is decreased attention and concentration. This is a common complaint for those with all levels of injury severity, and is the most frequent cognitive problem experienced for those with mild TBI. Sometimes what some clients describe as a memory problem is actually be a problem with attention. Individuals may have trouble remembering things because they are not attending to the information well.

How might trouble with attention/concentration impact vocational success?

Your client may have...

- **Difficulty sustaining attention focus or maintaining concentration**
Example: Your client might work on a project for 15-20 minutes and then walk away from the project in search of something else to do, despite the project not being finished.
- **Distractibility due to noises or visual information that wouldn't have bothered your client before injury.**
Example: Your client might have difficulty listening to a conversation in a crowded restaurant or to a customer in a busy store because your client is distracted by other people talking and moving around.
- **Trouble concentrating while reading.**
Example: Your client might report reading a manual or other work-related material and report not being able to remember what it was about when finished reading.
- **Difficulty doing more than one thing at a time.**
Example: Your client makes a mistake ringing up a customer's purchases while a co-worker asks your client a question.
- **Difficulty "switching gears" or changing focus from one thing to another.**
Example: Your client may continue to do a job the wrong way even after a supervisor or co-worker explains why the job should be done a different way.
- **Disagreements about what a supervisor or co-worker said due to missing the information initially.**
Example: When discussing with your client a concern that his or her supervisor shared



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with you, such as your client not coming to work on a scheduled day, your client tells you that the supervisor never discussed this information with him or her.

What strategies may be helpful to my client in managing attention/concentration problems to facilitate vocational success?

Like the home and community, there are many ways in which attention difficulties can be addressed in the workplace.

- **Reduce clutter.** As a starting point, you might want to consider working with your client to create a work environment that is organized and free from clutter in an effort to minimize potential distractions. For example, suggest to your client that all papers, files, and other items be put in the appropriate places at the end of the day. When your client returns to work the next morning, he or she should take out only materials needed for a given project. Once completed with that project, he or she should again put away all materials prior to starting the next project. This will help to minimize clutter that can serve as distractors.
- **Manage communication.** Other sources of distraction can come in the form of interruptions from co-workers, office or cell phone ringers, and email alarms on computers. You and your client might want to work together to identify ways to minimize these other sources of distraction. For example, encourage your client to close his/her office door when working on a project in an effort to decrease interruptions by other co-workers. If possible, encourage your client to keep his/her phone ringer off while working on a project and send all calls to voicemail. Once the project is completed, your client can listen to his or her voicemail and return the necessary phone calls.
- **Avoid multi-tasking.** Further ideas for helping to address attention difficulties in the work place would include encouraging your client to work on one project at a time. Multi-tasking can be extremely problematic and result in poor work performance for individuals with higher-order attention difficulties. Note-taking is frequently of benefit for an individual who has sustained a TBI. Encourage your client to take notes during meetings and phone conversations so that he/she can revisit information that might be forgotten. This could also help to promote your client's engagement in the discussion and keep his or her mind focused during meetings.
- **Collaborate with employer/co-workers.** It could be of great benefit to discuss these strategies your client's employer and co-workers so that they might understand how



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your client is trying to adapt to the workplace following TBI. This could also help to avoid misunderstandings. For example, if a colleague or supervisor requests that your client stops working on one project and moves on to a new project, your client might insist upon finishing the first project prior to transitioning in an effort to avoid multi-tasking. If your client's workplace is educated about strategies to compensate for attention and concentration difficulties, misunderstandings, such as this one, might be avoided.

- **Educate supervisor/co-workers.** You can also teach strategies to use when interacting with your client. You may wish to encourage your client's supervisor and co-workers to ensure that they have your client's attention prior to important discussing information. A person is giving you his or her attention when he or she is looking at you and giving you consistent eye contact. After giving your client important information, encourage supervisors and co-workers to ask follow-up questions to ensure that your client was paying attention and heard the information. It might also be important to limit the number of people that are around your client at one time. Meetings with a large number of employees may make it more difficult for your client to attend to conversations. Searching for quieter settings with fewer people may make it easier for your client to participate in the talk and activities of office meetings.

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Memory (Mild, Moderate/Severe):

Many people have some type of memory problem after injury. One of the areas of the brain that is considered important for memory functioning, the anterior temporal lobes, is particularly vulnerable to injury from TBI. Most people can remember information that they knew well before injury, but have trouble learning and remembering new information.

How might trouble with memory impact vocational success?

Your client may....

- **Forget appointments**
Example: Your client might forget the time of an office meeting, and as a result, not attend the meeting.
- **Forget peoples' names**
Example: Your client might forget the names of his or her co-workers, supervisors, and customers, which could make it more difficult to build relationships.
- **Need to have things repeated many times**
Example: Your client might need his or her supervisor to frequently explain the steps of how to complete a task, despite having previously completed the task.
- **Take longer to learn new information**
Example: It might take your client much longer than his or her co-workers to learn how to complete a new task.
- **Forget things very quickly**
Example: Your client might forget important information discussed in a meeting shortly after the after the meeting is over.
- **Frequently lose or misplace things**
Example: Your client might misplace or lose his or her ID badge, keys, or other work-related items.
- **Repeat questions or the same story over and over again**
Example: Your client might repetitively ask a colleague the same question about where an item is located in the office.



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What strategies may be helpful to my client in managing memory problems to facilitate vocational success?

- **External memory aid: Memory Notebook.** Essential to compensation strategies for memory is an external memory aid. Often a referral to a cognitive therapist can be helpful in creating an individualized memory prosthesis that will fit your client's needs. External memory aids frequently include:
 - A calendar for recording important dates and appointment times
 - To-do lists that can include information for both work and home environments
 - A section for notes that is utilized when attending meetings at work or on phone calls.
- **Utilization of memory aid.** Imperative to the success of an external memory aid is that it is brought everywhere and is frequently referenced throughout the day. If your client did not use a planner prior to injury, he/she might need numerous cues to remind him/her to refer his/her planner. Encourage your client to reference his or her external memory aid at the start of their day, mid-morning, lunch, mid-afternoon, before leaving the office, and prior to going to bed. While this might seem excessive, it is better to over-do-it, than under-do-it when creating a new habit or routine for your client.
- **Other external memory aids.** You may wish to also consider the use of a digital watch and other alarm systems as cues to prompt your client to reference his or her planner. Alternatively, your client might be more responsive to the use of programs, such as Yahoo! Calendar, to send text messages to be sent to your client's cell phone to remind him or her to look at his or her planner.
- **Enhancing success of external memory aids.** It is also essential to encourage your client to use only one external memory aid. Writing information down in more than one place can lead to confusion and the potential for information to "slip through the cracks." Don't forget that writing information on sticky notes and attaching them to a computer monitor can serve as a source of distraction. When working with your client on establishing an external memory device, strongly encourage and model to your client the need to write down all important information.
- **Educate supervisors and co-workers.** It might also be of benefit to work with employers and co-workers of your client to allow him or her to have more time to learn



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new information. The employer and co-workers of your client will need reminders and education on the rationale of why individuals with TBI learn new information more slowly. You might also want to encourage your client to repeat back information he/she needs to remember to supervisors and co-workers. Supervisors and co-workers could initially work with your client to cue them to engage in this behavior. Over time, this could become a practice that your client could engage in without cues from supervisors or co-workers. Lastly, if your client repeats himself during conversations by retelling the same story, you might want to cue him or her by saying something like, "Yes, you had just told me about that." This strategy could be taught to your client's workplace.

- **Organize the workspace.** Encourage your client to keep files, important papers, keys, etc. in the same place at their office or work space. Work with your client to label drawers and cabinets in their office or work space. When providing education to your client's supervisors and co-workers on changes in short-term memory after brain injury, relate this to the importance of returning all of the client's items to the designated space should they need to borrow them.

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Slowed Information Processing Speed (Mild, Moderate/Severe):

The most common cognitive problem noted after TBI is slowed processing speed, particularly for those whose injuries occurred due to a high velocity event (like a car accident).

How might trouble with slowed processing speed impact vocational success?

Your client may....

- **Take longer to answer questions**
Example: A customer may ask your client a question about a product and your client appears to take more time than is anticipated to respond to the customer.
- **Take longer to understand things he or she understood easily before**
Example: Your client's co-workers might report that they now need to repeat information related to projects on multiple occasions prior to client expressing his or her understanding of the information.
- **Take a long time to react to things (this may be dangerous in emergency situations or when driving).**
Example: Your client might notice that there is a spill in a hallway. It might take him or her longer to identify who needs to be contacted in order to get the spill cleaned up.

What strategies may be helpful to my client in managing slowed information processing to facilitate vocational success?

- Encourage your client to schedule extra time to read work-related materials, prepare presentations, learn new information, etc. It is also important to educate your client's co-workers and supervisors on the need for more time in these situations.
- Your client may have trouble thinking quickly in an emergency situation. Have your client write down emergency procedures and emergency contact information in a form that can be carried with him or her at all times while at work. This information could be attached to his or her ID badge or in his or her planner.
- Encourage your client to ask others to slow down or repeat information if they have trouble understanding what has been said.

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Visuospatial Difficulties (Moderate/Severe):

Sometime persons with TBI experience difficulty with visuospatial functioning, including not attending to one side of space, having trouble recognizing items, and getting confused with directions.

How might visuospatial difficulties impact vocational success?

Your client may have....

- **Difficulty attending to things on one side, usually the left side.**
Example: Your client frequently bumps into things, usually on the left side of a doorframe when entering a room.
- **Difficulty recognizing shapes and telling the difference between shapes.**
Example: Your client encounters difficulty when reading a building's directory and with a map of the floor plan.
- **Difficulty finding their way around, especially in new places.**
Example: When your client comes to see you for his or her initial appointment, he or she gets lost in your office building.

What strategies may be helpful to my client in managing visuospatial difficulties to facilitate vocational success?

- **Arrange work space.** Work with your client to arrange his or her workspace and materials so that his or her visuospatial difficulties are minimized. For example, if he or she has trouble attending to things on his or her left, you might consider the following:
 - Place frequently used objects, such as the phone or stapler on the right side his or her desk.
 - Encourage your client to draw a red line down the left side of the page and encourage your client to remind him or her to find the red line before reading each line of text.
 - Provide education to your client's supervisor and colleagues on the need to approach your client on the right side.



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- **Educate employer.** Educate your client's employer on the need to provide assistance to your client when introducing them to new places. You may need to make the recommendation to your client's employer that your client is not sent to new places alone if visuospatial skills are a problem.
- **Address transportation issues.** Find out if your client has problems with their visuospatial abilities that affect their ability to get around in the community. Sometimes, visuospatial problems will prevent a person from being able to return to driving, etc. Reinforce with your client that he or she should not drive unless they have been released to do so by his or her doctor. Consequently, your client may need transportation to and from work or be unable to return to a position that is dependent on your client's ability to drive. If your client is interested in finding out more about driving after TBI, ask him or her to speak with their his or her physician. There are special driving evaluation and training programs that are available to assess driving safety.
- **Safety concerns.** If there is a concern about safety due to visuospatial problems when cooking or using various tools, discuss with your client the need for accommodations or changes to his or her job duties. If accommodations to ensure safety cannot be arranged, your client might need to consider a different position that better promotes his or her safety when at work.
- **Additional services.** Consider referring your client to an occupational therapist or cognitive rehabilitation specialist who can teach visual scanning strategies to compensate for visuospatial difficulties.

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Language/Communication (Moderate/Severe):

Unlike persons with stroke, persons with TBI tend to have fewer problems with basic language abilities, like understanding language or being able to speak. Some individuals may experience difficulties with basic language problems, but the more common difficulties faced are with social communication abilities.

How might trouble with language/communication impact vocational success?

Your client may...

- **Have difficulty finding the right words to tell others what they want to say.**
Example: Your client is trying to discuss a problem with the photocopier with a co-worker and cannot think of the word “photocopier.”
- **Talk around a topic, never really getting to the point; or get off topic when telling a story or answering a question.**
Example: Your client begins to make casual conversation with a co-worker during a break. After being asked about how your client enjoyed his or her weekend, your client tells a small detail about his or her weekend and then begins a detailed story about the weather and how terrible the weather has been for the past several days and on and on and on he or she goes about the weather without really answering the co-worker’s question about his or her enjoyment over the past weekend.
- **Have trouble understanding what others say to them.**
Example: Your client provides the eye contact and facial expressions that indicate he or she is listening to what his or her supervisor is saying, but when asked about the information later, your client indicates that he or she did not understand when the supervisor said.
- **Have difficulty keeping up with a conversation especially if talking to more than one person.**
Example: After two more customers join a conversation between your client and another customer, your client cannot no longer follow what the customers are saying about the merchandise they recently bought.
- **Have difficulty starting a conversation.**
Example: During lunch, a co-worker begins casual conversation with your client. Your client answers the co-worker’s question, but is unable to ask follow-up questions of the co-worker to keep the conversation going.



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- **Talk about topics that are too personal or offensive to others.**

Example: Your client inappropriately asks a co-worker about whether or not the co-worker was intimate on a recent date.

What strategies may be helpful to my client in managing communication difficulties to facilitate vocational success?

- When talking with your client, encourage your client's supervisor and co-workers to ask your client every so often if he or she understood what's been said. When telling your client something important, your client's supervisor or co-workers may wish to ask your client to repeat the information.
- Encourage your client to be pro-active and ask for information to be repeated or rephrased if he or she doesn't understand. Reassure your client that they needn't there is no need to be embarrassed about asking others to repeat things; we all have to do this sometimes.
- When possible, encourage your client to try to have only one person at a time speaking to them. You may need to educate your client's workplace about why this helpful to your client in an effort to promote their understanding and awareness of this communication strategy.
- Educate your client's workplace on the need to allow more time for your client to answer a question/request or to explain a need or idea to another co-worker/supervisor.
- During meetings with your client, encourage your client to speak slowly and not to be nervous about finding the right word. Encourage him or her to also practice this strategy when in the workplace.
- Remind and encourage your client to use gestures or signals (for example, hand motions and facial expressions) to help express themselves. Compensation strategies such as these are frequently taught by speech and language pathologists. You might wish to consider referring your client for treatment from speech and language pathologist.
- When working individually with your client, you may wish to develop a signal that will let your client know when he or she has gotten off topic. For example, you could hold up your index finger to let him or her know he or she is off topic. Subsequently



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encourage your client's family to use this same signal. With time and consistency, this signal could help to raise your client's awareness of this communication difficult and when to correct the behavior. Once in the workplace, the individual who interacts most frequently with your client could be enlisted to also use the signal in the workplace.

- If your client starts talking about something that is too personal or may be offensive to others, you may want to develop a signal to help let him or her know that this is occurring. You might hold up your hand or use some other signal that you and your client have agreed upon. After giving the signal, discuss the situation with your client and discuss what made you uncomfortable and how conversations of this nature could have serious, negative implications at the workplace. Encourage your client to stick to "safe" topics, like talking about sports, the news, or the weather when at work. Again, you will want to strongly encourage your client's family to use the same kind of signal. Consistency is essential to the success of such feedback strategies.

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Problem-Solving Difficulties (Moderate/Severe):

After TBI, some individuals have problems generating solutions to everyday or complex problems. This problem falls within the realm of executive functioning, which is often associated with damage to the prefrontal cortex and/or its connections to the rest of the brain.

How might problem-solving difficulties impact vocational success?

Your client may....

- **Make quick decisions without thinking about what will happen.**
Example: Without consulting co-workers or a supervisor, your client decides that the best way to deliver needed materials to a different office location is to drive them across town using a company car, despite the fact that he or she has not been cleared to return to driving.
- **Seem to get stuck between different choices, unable to pick between them.**
Example: When discussing different ways of how to handle a scheduling conflict at work, your client is unable to pick a solution to best meet his or her needs.
- **Seem to get stuck on one idea and is unable to consider other choices.**
Example: In a discussion with a supervisor, your client might repetitively suggest a solution of how to solve a problem and is unable to consider any other solutions or feedback from the supervisor on why other solutions need to be considered.
- **Not seem to approach problems in a way that makes sense.**
Example: When the copier machine at work is broken, your client cannot continue to work on his or her task for the day. Because he or she is without work to do, your client decides to go home for the day without telling anyone.

What strategies may be helpful to my client in managing problem solving difficulties to facilitate vocational success?

- **Teach problem-solving strategy.** You may wish to consider teaching your client the following five-step approach to problem-solving for addressing difficulties encountered in the workplace:
 - Identifying the problem: What is contributing to the problem? When is it occurring? Who does the problem involve?



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- Identifying possible solutions: What are all of the possibilities, no matter how feasible, to the problem? Encouraging your client to think from different perspectives, might help to promote greater thought flexibility.
 - Weighing the pros and cons of the solutions: Identifying what is both good and bad about each of the solutions. Perhaps one solution might take more time than is available or will cost the company money. Perhaps another solution your client can achieve without involving other co-workers.
 - Implementing the “best” solution: After identifying which solution has the greatest number of pros and least number of cons, this solution should be put into action for addressing the problem.
 - Assessing whether or not the solution addressed the problem: Is the problem still occurring after you have implemented your solution? If so, taking what you have learned about why this problem did not work, evaluate your solutions again and implement the next best solution!
- **Practice applications to workplace setting.** When teaching your client this problem solving approach, apply it to potential difficulties that your client might encounter in his or her workplace. After working through these hypothetical problems, practice applying it with your client when visiting him or her at the workplace. Both hypothetical and actual modeling of how to implement this approach might improve your client’s mastery and ability to apply it when by him or herself.
 - **Encourage communication with supervisor/co-workers.** Additionally, talk with your client about ways that he or she can ask for help from a supervisor or trusted co-workers with generating ideas for a solution to an expected problem at the workplace.

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Organizational Difficulties (Mild, Moderate/Severe):

Organizational difficulties are also a common problem after TBI. Such problems may result from inattention and/or executive functioning problems.

How might organizational difficulties impact vocational success?

Your client may have....

- **Difficulty organizing their time to get things done (for example, may tell someone they can be at a party at the same time they have a doctor's appointment).**
Example: Your client may tell a co-worker that he or she can cover the co-worker's shift during the same time your client has a doctor's appointment.
- **Trouble setting goals, planning the correct steps to reach a goal, or completing the steps to reach a goal.**
Example: Your client needs to update his or her resume in order to obtain a different job after injury. Despite your requests to update it prior to your scheduled meeting time, your client comes to two consecutive appointments and has not updated his or her resume.
- **Trouble completing tasks in the correct order.**
Example: Your client turns off office appliances, such as a computer or copier machine, by simply pulling its electrical cord out of the plug and does not go through the proper steps to turn off the appliance.
- **Trouble getting ready for daily appointments, school, or work.**
Example: Your client is often late to work because he or she realizes that he or she forgot to brush his or her teeth prior to walking out the door.

What strategies may be helpful to my client in managing organizational difficulties to facilitate vocational success?

- **Break down tasks.** Work with your client to break tasks down into smaller steps. For example, getting ready to leave the house for work in the morning can be broken down into: taking a shower, getting dressed, eating breakfast, getting stuff together, and leaving the house. For some clients, just major steps will be enough, for others, tasks may need to be broken down into detailed steps.



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Traumatic Brain Injury for VR Counselors

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Training Session 2c: Cognitive Changes that May Occur Following TBI, Impact on Vocational Issues, and Strategies to Address these Changes

- **Checklists.** Create checklists with your client to organize his or her daily work-related activities. For example, when your client comes to the office, he or she first picks up the mail, sorts the mail for its proper delivery location, delivers the mail, goes through the building a second time to pick up mail to be sent out, etc. It can be finely detailed, or just cover the overall goals. Your client can get in the habit of referring to the checklist and marking off each task or step that has been accomplished.
- **Preparation.** If your client has trouble getting organized to leave the house for work, encourage him or her to get some things ready the night before. For example, he or she can choose what they will wear the night before and lay the clothes out. They can also use a checklist to help them get ready. All the things they have to do should be put on the list.
- **Work with cognitive rehabilitation specialist to tailor memory system for work-related organization.** Additionally, if you referred your client to a cognitive rehabilitation therapist for assistance in developing an external memory aid, you can request that the therapist also uses the external memory aid to promote organization and time management via scheduling of activities in your client's planner. Have your client to use a memory aid to keep track of his or her daily schedule and things that need to be done. Encourage your client to check his or her memory aid every day and on multiple occasions. Checking the memory aid should be a frequent part of your client's daily routine.

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Reasoning and Judgment (Moderate/Severe):

Problems with reasoning and judgment may also be experienced after TBI. These problems are often associated with damage to the prefrontal cortex and/or its connections to the rest of the brain.

How might trouble with reasoning and judgment impact vocational success?

Your client may....

- **Have trouble thinking in abstract terms.**
Example: Your client may have trouble applying a strategy used in one situation to other similar situations.
- **Make literal or “concrete” interpretations.**
Example: If a co-worker jokingly tells your client to “take a hike” your client may interpret the phrase as a suggestion to take a long walk in a forest.
- **Show poor judgment in real-life situations.**
Example: Loaning a significant sum of money to a casual acquaintance or sharing a bank account PIN number with a co-worker your client just recently met.
- **Have trouble making decisions that are in his or her long-term best interests.**
Example: Your client refuses to discuss modifications or other changes to his or her job duties after his or her TBI.
- **Display poor safety awareness.**
Example: Deciding to drive a company car when your client has not yet received clearance from a physician to return to driving.

What strategies may be helpful to my client in managing reasoning and judgment difficulties to facilitate vocational success?

- If your client is experiencing significant difficulties with reasoning and judgment, you may need to consider the type of work that will be a best fit for your client. Your client might need to obtain or return to a position that is more concrete and routine in nature, rather than a position that is contingent upon frequent decision-making.



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- Consider as well if your client's reasoning and judgment ability would be better suited to working in a group or pair, rather than independently.

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Some of the information in this guide was adapted, with permission of the authors, from the following sources:

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