

# Traumatic Brain Injury for VR Counselors

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

## Training Session 2e: Ways to Adapt the VR Counselor's Practice to Maximize the Service Experience of Clients with TBI.

As has just been reviewed, persons with TBI may experience sensory, motor, cognitive, behavioral, and emotional difficulties. While each individual and each brain injury is unique, some areas of impairment are particularly common after TBI and may affect a person's ability to benefit from treatment. Such difficulties can directly impact your clinical interaction and may affect the mechanics of setting up appointments, following through with instructions/suggestions, etc. For example, a client with memory problems may forget scheduled appointment times or may fail to remember to complete necessary forms. A client with dysarthria (slurred speech) or slowed speech may have difficulty in communicating their needs with your office staff. Communication problems can be increased when carried out via telephone. The following are some tips that may be helpful in enhancing the experience of your client with TBI:

### *When working with someone with a problem with learning or memory, the following strategies are recommended:*

- Provide all important information in writing
- Repeat important information
- Ask client to repeat back important information
- Depending on the severity of the impairment, consultation with caregivers may be needed.
- Persons should be encouraged to write down important information in an organized fashion, such as a planner or memory notebook.
- Persons may need reminder calls the day before their appointment, and, if needed, reminders to bring necessary paperwork

### *When working with someone with a problem with attention, the following strategies are recommended:*

- Conduct the session in a quiet environment with minimal distractions
- Focus on one topic at a time
- Ask client to repeat back important information



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- If client is getting off topic, provide redirection and cueing to return to topic at hand

### *When working with someone with problems with reasoning, the following strategies are recommended:*

- Provide explicit problem solving steps that the client can follow
- Provide appropriate choices if the client is unable to generate realistic plans
- Assist your client in breaking down complex activities into smaller steps, and create checklists as necessary

### *When working with someone with behavior problems or problems with social communication skills, the following strategies are recommended:*

- Persons with TBI may have difficulty reading more subtle social cues, so it may be necessary to provide direct immediate feedback regarding the behavior. Start off by saying something positive and then provide feedback regarding the behavior. Follow this with a reemphasis on the positive. Remember to maintain a kind and gentle tone.
- Encourage the person to practice interpersonal skills with family members and friends

### *When working with someone with slowed speed of processing, the following strategies are recommended:*

- Allow extra time for the person to process information and to respond.
- Present information at a slower rate of speed, and focus on one issue at a time
- Encourage the client to ask others to slow down or to repeat information as needed

Another way in which you can make a substantial change in your client with TBI's service experience is to conduct staff training for your support staff to ensure that clients are treated with courtesy and flexibility. Training should include all staff members that might interact with clients, including receptionists, administrative assistants, and others. Increasing staff knowledge about the potential difficulties experienced by clients with TBI may prevent negative interactions from occurring. This may also enhance the experience for both your clients with TBI and staff members. Some areas of difficulty that may be encountered and tips for staff members include:



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- **Dysarthria:** Some clients with TBI may have slurred speech. This can be misinterpreted as sounding like intoxication, and clients may be misperceived as being "drunk." Increasing staff awareness about this potential problem may prevent a negative interaction from occurring. In addition, staff will need to pay very close attention to clients with slurred speech, as they may be difficult to understand. If a problem, the staff member may ask the client to write down the information that is being communicated.
- **Slowed speed of processing/response:** Frequently clients with TBI may take longer to respond to questions or may take longer to get their ideas out. Encourage staff to be patient and wait for the client to complete their statement. Talking around the client by speaking only with the family member can be upsetting to the person with TBI. If clarification is needed, staff can either ask the client or the family member to clarify.
- **Memory problems:** Clients with TBI are likely to have difficulty remembering things like appointments. To facilitate client attendance, encourage your staff to do the following:
  - Provide appointment date and time in writing.
  - Call client with reminder the day before the appointment.
  - Potentially call the client on the day of appointment with reminder.
  - Provide any additional instructions needed for appointment in writing.

These are but a few of the issues that may result in staff/client misunderstandings. Take the time to let staff know if there are any modifications that you would recommend in the way that they interact with specific clients to facilitate a good clinical experience. In general, encourage your staff to use courtesy with all clients, and to come to you if they are having any particular challenge in interacting with a specific client.



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## References

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

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