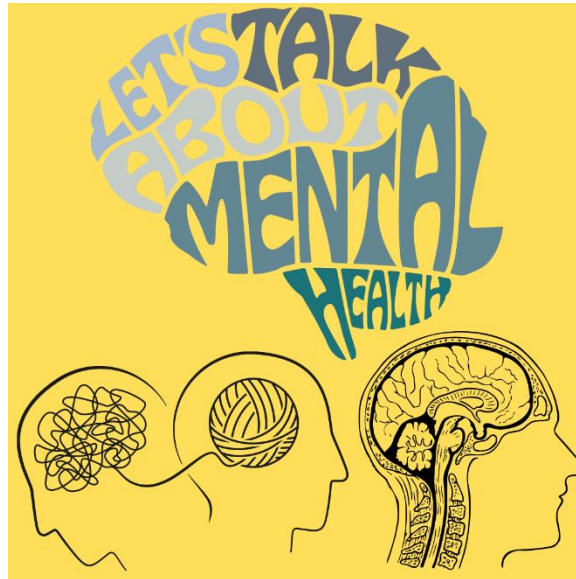


Experiencing Mental Illness After a Traumatic Brain Injury



May is Mental Health Awareness Month. In recognition of the millions of Americans who suffer from a mental illness, we take a look at how traumatic brain injuries, or TBIs, affect mental health. While TBIs are known for their physical effects, such as decreased motor function, fewer people understand the impacts these injuries have on mental health.

Traumatic brain injuries have long been known to alter a survivor's mood, personality, and behavior. Many of these changes are associated with mental illness. A survivor may experience temporary or permanent symptoms of illness, depending on the nature and severity of the TBI. The reasons are varied and may include:

- Dysfunction in the way the brain communicates
- Stress on the body's autonomic nervous system
- The brain's reaction to physical and emotional trauma
- A combination of the above

The brain is a wonderfully complex creation, responsible for the healthy operation of many parts of the body. Suffering a traumatic brain injury can, therefore, result in unpredictable changes in mental health, which will vary from one survivor to another. Even a mild TBI can, for instance, disrupt neurovascular coupling, a process that encompasses the relationship between neurons and the brain's blood vessels. This may lead to neurological conditions and other effects on brain health that can trigger or aggravate mental illness.

These are a few of the most common mental and emotional conditions that are linked to TBIs:

Depression. This condition is marked by persistent feelings of sadness and loss of interest that can interfere with a survivor's daily life. Symptoms often include:

- Extreme sadness and an overall negative emotional state
- Little to no motivation, even to accomplish simple daily tasks
- Hopelessness and a negative outlook on one's life, the world, or future

- Suicidal ideation

Anxiety. There are different types of anxiety, and a traumatic brain injury can either trigger or inflame pre-existing symptoms such as:

- Extreme worrying
- Inability to relax
- Difficulty sleeping
- Feeling tense

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD refers to difficulty recovering after a survivor experiences a terrifying event. The symptoms of PTSD often overlap with other mental conditions, so a survivor may display:

- Anxiety or depression
- Panic attacks
- A sense of being overwhelmed
- Flashbacks to the events surrounding the TBI (such as a car accident)
- Insomnia

Mood and personality changes. Emotional changes are closely associated with mental illness and can result in permanent personality disorders. For example, a survivor could experience:

- Extreme irritability and anger
- Short temper
- Mood swings
- Teariness
- Impulsivity
- Anxiety

Treating these and other mental and emotional conditions is no simple task. Identifying the problem itself can be a challenge but is usually necessary before an appropriate treatment plan can be put in place for the survivor. A proper diagnosis and other tools could point to such treatments as:

- Medication
- Psychotherapy or counseling
- Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy
- Long-term residential treatment
- Hospitalization

Some treatments are specific to the survivor's exact injuries. For example, PTSD often requires a therapy regimen that is unlike those used for other mental and emotional issues. Consultation with experts in neuropsychology, mental health, and other professions may be necessary. The prescribed treatments may last anywhere from several months to the rest of the survivor's life.

Mental health problems are serious and should be treated as such, so be sure your loved one gets the attention he or she needs. To learn more about traumatic brain injuries, and for more information and resources from the Brain Injury Association of South Carolina, click [here](#).

About the author: [Andrew Gowdown](#) currently serves as the president-elect of the Brain Injury Association of South Carolina Board of Directors. He is an attorney with Rosen Hagood in Charleston, South Carolina, and focuses his practice on helping clients with their complex personal injury cases. He has represented and worked with survivors of traumatic brain injuries for over twenty years.