

How to RETURN TO WORK after a Brain Injury

By Gregory Ayotte, Director of Consumer Services, Brain Injury Association of America

Returning to work or getting a first job can be difficult and stressful for people who have sustained a brain injury. Each state offers services to help, but the services may be time limited and not everyone will qualify.

Vocational Rehabilitation

Vocational rehabilitation services (also known as Voc Rehab or VR) are offered by agencies in every state. These programs are not entitlements; only individuals considered eligible can receive VR services. Eligibility criteria require an individual be at least 16 years old, unemployed or under-employed, and have a physical or mental disability that results in a substantial barrier to employment. In addition, the individual must be able to benefit from services. An individual may also need help to prepare for, find, and succeed in paid employment.

When resources are limited (as is the case with most states), individuals with the most significant disabilities must be served first. This means individuals with a brain injury who are eligible for services may be placed on a waiting list or may not receive vocational services at all.

Just like every person is different, every state vocational rehabilitation agency is different. Agencies may not offer the same services in the same way so individuals seeking services must learn how to access the program in their own state. Most vocational rehabilitation services are free for eligible applicants; however, applicants may be asked to use other benefits, such as insurance, Pell grants or other financial aid for training or higher education, to pay part of program costs.

Contact your state Brain Injury Association to learn more about return to work assistance. Visit www.biausa.org/stateaffiliates.htm to find a chartered state affiliate near you.

Ticket to Work

The Ticket to Work and Self-Sufficiency Program is an employment program for people with disabilities who are interested in working. The Ticket Program is a result of the Ticket to Work and Work Incentives Improvement Act of 1999, a law designed to remove many of the barriers that previously influenced people's decisions about going to work because of the concerns over losing health care coverage. The goal of the Ticket Program is to increase opportunities and choices for people receiving Social Security disability benefits to obtain employment, vocational rehabilitation and other support services from public and private providers, employers and other organizations.

Under the Ticket Program, the Social Security Administration provides disability beneficiaries with a voucher they may use to obtain the services and jobs they need from local organizations called Employment Networks (ENs). To find out more about these services visit ww.yourtickettowork.com.

More Resources

Other useful resources to help people understand the issues associated with returning to work after a brain injury include:

- The employment section of BIAA's website contains a link to our booklet on Employment. See www.biausa.org/braininjury-community.htm
- TBI Supports is a website dedicated to offering information about research in the area of supported employment and return to work. Locate the section on brain injury research in this area: www.worksupport.com/resources/listContent.cfm/25/0
- The Mayo Clinic offers a Guide to Employers for working with a person with a brain injury: www.mayo.edu/pmts/mc1200-mc1299/mc1298.pdf

- The Job Accommodation Network offers several useful articles about employment issues for a person with a brain injury as well as free consulting services around accommodation issues in the workplace. See www.askjan.org/media/Braininjury.html and www.askjan.org/indiv/index.htm

Checklist for Thinking (or Rethinking) about Employment*

Instructions: For each topic, check off one box (in Column 1, 2 or 3), and then total your checkmarks for each column at the end. Review your answers with a health care professional such as an occupational therapist, psychologist, counselor, vocational counselor, or your doctor. After reviewing your answers with your health care professional, consider the recommendations at the end of the checklist to help guide you in your continuing recovery and thinking (or re-thinking) about employment. **Recommendations on page 17.**

TOPIC	COLUMN 1: <i>High Barriers to Employment</i>	COLUMN 2: <i>Moderate Barriers to Employment</i>	COLUMN 3: <i>Low Barriers to Employment</i>
Headaches	<input type="radio"/> Headaches frequently limit my activities	<input type="radio"/> Headaches sometimes limit my activities	<input type="radio"/> Headaches do not limit my activities
Sleep	<input type="radio"/> I sleep poorly most nights	<input type="radio"/> I have some difficulties with sleep	<input type="radio"/> I have no problems with sleep
Daytime Fatigue	<input type="radio"/> I need to take daily naps	<input type="radio"/> I need to take occasional naps	<input type="radio"/> I don't need to take naps
Seizures	<input type="radio"/> My seizures are not controlled	<input type="radio"/> My seizures are controlled but I do not have medical clearance to work	<input type="radio"/> I do not have seizures (this includes if they are controlled with medication)
Thinking Skills	<input type="radio"/> I have significant difficulties with thinking skills, for example with memory, concentration, multi-tasking, etc.	<input type="radio"/> I have some difficulties with thinking skills	<input type="radio"/> I am able to manage independently with my thinking skills, for example through use of strategies
Emotional Well-being	<input type="radio"/> My mood is down or I get anxious easily; it is an effort for me to do everyday tasks and/or to socialize	<input type="radio"/> My mood or anxiety has some ups/downs that stop me from doing things on some days	<input type="radio"/> My mood is stable; I have no problems with anxiety or depressed mood
Personal Care and Hygiene	<input type="radio"/> I need assistance and reminders for personal care including hygiene and toileting	<input type="radio"/> It takes more than an hour to get ready in the morning or I need some reminders for personal hygiene	<input type="radio"/> I am independent for personal care and hygiene; I do not need reminders and can get ready quickly
Attending Appointments	<input type="radio"/> I need assistance to be on time for appointments and to get there	<input type="radio"/> I need some reminders to be on time but I can get there on my own	<input type="radio"/> I am independent in remembering and getting to my appointments
Managing Time and Activities	<input type="radio"/> I need help to plan and manage my activities; I have few or no leisure activities	<input type="radio"/> I need some reminders to help plan and manage my activities; I have some leisure activities	<input type="radio"/> I am independent in planning, organizing and carrying out my activities; I have many leisure activities
Mobility	<input type="radio"/> I need assistance or supervision for mobility indoors and outdoors	<input type="radio"/> I need some assistance and cannot get around outside on my own	<input type="radio"/> I am fully independent for mobility indoors and outdoors
Transportation	<input type="radio"/> I need assistance from others for transportation	<input type="radio"/> I need some assistance/reminders, for example to help plan transportation	<input type="radio"/> I am independent with planning and taking transportation for all of my activities
Managing Finances	<input type="radio"/> I need assistance to budget, do banking and pay bills	<input type="radio"/> I need some assistance or reminders to manage my money	<input type="radio"/> I am independent in managing my money including banking and paying bills
Taking Medication	<input type="radio"/> I need assistance or reminders for medications	<input type="radio"/> I need some reminders for my medications	<input type="radio"/> I am independent with my medications
Using Strategies	<input type="radio"/> I need assistance to use strategies (e.g., notes, daytimer, pacing, communication aid), and/or to manage anxiety or frustration	<input type="radio"/> I have started to use strategies but I am not using them daily and/or I require some reminders to use the strategies	<input type="radio"/> I am efficient and independent in using strategies without reminders or assistance from others
Planning and Decision Making	<input type="radio"/> I need others to help me with planning and decision making	<input type="radio"/> I need some assistance with planning and decision making	<input type="radio"/> I have no difficulties with planning and decision making and others are not concerned about me
Rehabilitation Therapies	<input type="radio"/> My rehabilitation activities or therapies take up 2 or more days per week	<input type="radio"/> I am still involved in some rehabilitation activities but only once per week or less	<input type="radio"/> I have completed all of my formal rehabilitation activities and therapies
Up-to-date Skills and Education	<input type="radio"/> It has been a long time since I have worked; my training and education might be out of date	<input type="radio"/> It has been a while since I have worked; my skills and education may be out of date	<input type="radio"/> It has been less than 6 months since I have worked; my training and education are current
TOTALS: _____	COLUMN 1: _____	COLUMN 2: _____	COLUMN 3: _____

* The checklist was reprinted with permission of Brainstreams.ca, a project of The Pacific Coast Brain Injury Conference Society.

Recommendations:

If most or all of your checkmarks are in Column 3, you may be ready for paid employment. Check with your doctor or other health care professionals and consider connecting with a vocational rehabilitation counselor. If you have checkmarks in Column 1 or 2, you may or may not be ready for paid employment. The following recommendations may be helpful for you:

Keep focusing your energy on rehabilitation activities and therapies.

- If you are having problems with headaches, sleep, fatigue, seizures or emotional well-being, talk to your healthcare professional if you have not already done so.
- Ensure that you are following through on good personal hygiene.
- Find ways to build your endurance, for example a regular exercise program.
- Learn useful strategies to manage problems with fatigue, memory, anxiety, frustration, communication, etc. An occupational therapist can help with this. Remember, it takes lots of practice and repetition to use strategies successfully and out of habit!
- Aim to become involved in regularly scheduled activities such as exercise, recreation and social activities.
- Try some community activities such as joining a gym, taking a class or attending a support group meeting.
- Think about doing some volunteer work. This will help you get back into a regular schedule, make contact with other people and build your resume.

This checklist is one tool to help assess readiness for employment. On its own, this checklist cannot determine if someone is ready to go back to work. Please share your feedback about this checklist by sending comments to info@brainstreams.ca.

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For more information about brain injury or services and resources in Virginia, please contact BIAV:

Toll-free Help-line: (800) 444-6443 ♦ E- mail: info@biav.net ♦ Website: www.biav.net

