



# Connecting Domestic Violence and Brain Injury

## A Professional's Guide to Screening & Intervening for Brain Injury

The Brain Injury Association of Virginia (BIAV), along with the Virginia Department of Health, has been investigating the intersection between brain injury and domestic violence **since 2020**. Our goal is to identify this population through screening, find out what their needs are, and provide them with support.

Between January and September of 2021, **65 screenings** were completed at sexual and domestic violence agencies across the state of Virginia. **Seventy-six percent** of those who were hit in the head, choked, and/or strangled screened positive for brain injury, and almost **one out of four** reported being hit, choked, or strangled **more than six times**.

It is estimated that as many as **31,500,000 women** in the United States live with a brain injury caused by intimate partner violence, and **21,000,000 of these women** have likely sustained multiple brain injuries (Valera et al., 2019). Knowing how to identify and work with an individual who has sustained a brain injury can lead to a more productive relationship with them, and to better outcomes.



### What is a brain injury?

A brain injury is acquired through traumatic or non-traumatic results. A traumatic brain injury (TBI) is an alteration in brain function caused by external forces. Brain injury can result from common methods of abuse including being hit, slammed, shaken, or strangled. Multiple blows to the head increase the likelihood someone may experience a brain injury that changes their cognition, sensation, behavior, and motor function. Additionally, untreated brain injuries can lead to further injury and health complications.

### Causes and Symptoms

Potential causes for Traumatic Brain Injury

- 🔊 Punched in the face or head
- 🔊 Hit in the head with an object
- 🔊 Pushed against a wall or other surface
- 🔊 Shaken violently
- 🔊 Falling and hitting the head or face
- 🔊 Being strangled or choked
- 🔊 Shot in the face or head

### Signs & Symptoms of Traumatic Brain Injury

- ✔ Persistent headache
- ✔ Confusion
- ✔ Neck pain
- ✔ Slowed thinking, acting, speaking, or reading
- ✔ Short term memory loss
- ✔ Trouble paying attention, concentrating, making decisions, or solving problems
- ✔ Fatigue
- ✔ Loss of balance
- ✔ Blurred vision
- ✔ Ringing in the ears
- ✔ Signs of strangulation: voice, swallowing, breathing, vision, behavioral, and/or hearing changes



**1 in 3 women** and **1 in 4 men** will experience physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Within the LGBTQ community, intimate partner violence occurs at a rate equal to or higher than that of heterosexual and/or cisgender communities.

# Brain Injury Deficit Management Strategies



| Deficit | Problems Arising | Management Strategies |
|---------|------------------|-----------------------|
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*The person may...*

*You can...*

## Speed of Information Processing

- Take longer to complete tasks
- Take longer to answer questions
- Be unable to keep track of lengthy conversations

- Make allowances and give the person extra time
- Present only one thing or ask only one question at a time
- Not interrupt or answer for the person
- Verify that the person is keeping up with the conversation

## Fatigue

- Tire quickly (physically & mentally)
- Have reduced tolerance and ability to cope
- Become irritable
- Have other problems exacerbated

- Encourage the person to take breaks
- Schedule more demanding or essential tasks when the person is at their best

## Mental Tracking

- Have difficulty following instructions
- Lose track of what they are thinking or doing
- Get information confused

- Keep activities short and uncomplicated
- Ask specific or direct questions
- Provide reminders of the next step or task

## Memory

- Have difficulty learning new things
- Be forgetful
- Lose things
- Have difficulty recalling what they've learned

- Repeat information as necessary
- Encourage use of external memory aids (journals, calendars, time tables)
- Maintain 'special places' for belongings
- Give reminders and prompts to assist recall

## Attention

- Appear not to listen
- Miss details
- Forget what people have said
- Have difficulties concentrating
- Be unable to cope with more than one thing at a time
- Be easily distracted
- Change the subject often
- Get bored easily

- Shorten instructions/activities so they can be completed
- Write down instructions accurately and in a way that can be easily understood later
- Encourage the person to engage in only one activity at a time
- Reduce external distractions
- Bring the person's focus back to the current task

## Problem Solving

- Have difficulty working out solutions to problems
- Be unable to generate new ideas
- Have a disordered approach to problem solving

- Help identify an achievable outcome for the task, ensure there is a purpose
- Avoid giving open-ended tasks
- Assist the person to break a task down into smaller components
- Reduce the demands made upon the person (one thing at a time)

## Communication

- Have trouble initiating conversation
- Have trouble understanding non-verbal communication/body language
- Take statements literally

- Encourage participation by asking "What do you think about that?"; use open-ended statements such as "Tell me about..."
- Give verbal cues to communicate intent of conversation
- Use simple and direct language and avoid talking in abstract terms; avoid the use of sarcasm

## Planning & Organizing

- Have difficulty preparing for a task
- Be unable to work out the steps involving a task
- Have problems with organizing their own thoughts and explaining things to others

- Provide a written structure or guideline outlining the steps in order
- Help develop a timetable (weekly, daily) to establish a routine of activities
- Encourage the person to take time to think before they speak

## Reasoning

- Have a rigid and concrete thinking style
- Be resistant to change
- Have a simplistic understanding of emotions
- Show poor judgement and poor decision making skills

- Explain changes in routine in advance, giving reasons
- Avoid using emotional undertones
- Provide real life examples when offering explanations

## Self-Monitoring

- Show poor adherence to rules
- Not realize they have made errors
- 'Hog' conversations; be verbose and keep talking when others are no longer interested
- Have lower tolerance for frustrating situations

- Provide feedback promptly and in a respectful manner when errors occur
- Create and use signals to let them know they are talking too much
- Encourage turn-taking in conversations
- Gently redirect behavior to a different topic or activity

## The most common symptoms experienced by Virginians who were screened for brain injury and reported strangulation and/or a hit to the head, neck, or face were:



### Physical

76% Headaches

65% Dizziness



### Cognitive

71% Problems focusing or concentrating

61% Problems remembering



### Emotional

71% Feeling irritable or impatient

71% Feeling confused

## Screening Questions

If you know or suspect that someone has sustained a brain injury, use the following questions to determine if additional assistance is needed.

- ✓ Have you ever had a hit to your head, been strangled or choked?
- ✓ Were you ever seen in the emergency room, hospital, or by a doctor for a hit to your head or because of strangulation or choking?
- ✓ Did you ever black out or lose consciousness because of a hit to the head or due to choking or strangulation?
- ✓ Did you ever experience a period of being dazed and confused because of a hit to the head or due to choking or strangulation?
- ✓ Are you having trouble concentrating, organizing, or remembering things?
- ✓ Are you experiencing emotional changes such as irritability, sadness, or lack of motivation?
- ✓ Are you experiencing headaches, vision, and/or hearing problems or loss of balance?

## Impacts of Brain Injury

It's important to identify and address brain injury because of the impact that symptoms can have in an individual's cognition and behavior, which can lead to treatment challenges.

Brain Injury can impact an individual's

- ✓ Level of independence
- ✓ Educational or vocational engagement
- ✓ Social interaction
- ✓ Family interaction
- ✓ Life satisfaction

## What Next?

People who have sustained a brain injury need the right team to recover well and this team should include professionals who specialize in brain injury. BIAV can provide you with help addressing some of the common challenges your clients with brain injury can experience. Contact BIAV for personalized information and referral to local brain injury resources for your clients, and for technical assistance as a professional.



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Valera, E. M., Cao, A., Pasternak, O., Shenton, M. E., Kubicki, M., Makris, N., & Adra, N. (2019). White matter correlates of mild traumatic brain injuries in women subjected to intimate-partner violence: A preliminary study. *Journal of Neurotrauma*, 36(5), 661–668. <https://doi.org/10.1089/neu.2018.5734>