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Brain Injury Awareness Month: Recognizing TBIs in Our Military

One out of every five service members that return from battle in Iraq or Afghanistan has experienced a possible traumatic brain injury (TBI), according to the RAND Corporation. With more than 2.5 million service members having deployed since 9/11, that means half a million may have sustained a brain injury. These injuries, which can seem harmless and often go unnoticed, can have profound consequences, and we can't afford to ignore them.

A TBI is an injury to the brain, resulting from a jolt or blow to the head. It can range from mild to severe. TBIs are more common now than they have been in previous military engagements precisely because of how advanced our military has become. Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are prevalent in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in response the U.S. military has developed armored vehicles to withstand them. These armored vehicles are saving lives but in the process, they are taking a beating, and so are the men and women riding inside.

Anyone with children who play sports is probably familiar with the signs of a mild TBI, or a concussion: headache, dizziness, nausea, difficulty remembering things or paying attention, problems sleeping, and mood swings. Mild TBIs can be especially difficult to diagnose in the military, since stress can cause a similar reaction, and since symptoms do not always appear immediately following an injury.

Severe TBIs may be easier to identify, but soldiers are sometimes hesitant to report even a severe injury. It can be hard for many service members to acknowledge an invisible wound, as if a cognitive injury should be easier to control than a physical one. They may feel shame. They may fear being ostracized or criticized as weak. Or they might worry that a diagnosis will result in retribution or could affect their rank or service.

It can take months or even years for a service member to finally be diagnosed with a TBI that he or she may not even remember having sustained. Here in Hampton

Roads and Northern Virginia, we have approximately 425,000 veterans who may be suffering unknowingly and unnecessarily. Friends and family are often the first ones to notice a problem. That's why it's important for all of us to know the signs of a TBI. And since March is Brain Injury Awareness Month, now is the right time to remind ourselves.

As difficult as it may be for a service member to acknowledge and get help for a TBI, it can be just as hard for the loved ones who see the symptoms unfold and can't begin to imagine the injury that caused them. What can you do if you care for a service member who you think might have a TBI? First, try to get help for your loved one. Reach out to DVBIC or to the VA. Talk to doctors or your care coordinator.

But don't forget to get help for yourself. [Operation Family Caregiver](#) (OFC) can help and is provided in Virginia, with a special emphasis in Hampton Roads and Northern Virginia through Riverside Center for Excellence in Aging and Lifelong Health, in partnership with Virginia Veteran and Family Support (a program of the Virginia Department of Veterans Services). OFC offers free and confidential support to the families of those who have served our nation. Specially-trained "coaches" help caregivers learn how to overcome the obstacles they face and to manage any challenges that might come along. The program was started by the [Rosalynn Carter Institute for Caregiving](#), and it is proven to help caregivers become more satisfied with their lives, have fewer health issues, and generally become more prepared to take care of their families.

Learn more about Operation Family Caregiver at www.operationfamilycaregiver.org, or contact us at reachout@operationfamilycaregiver.org or riversideonline.org/cealh to find support. Brain Injury Awareness Month is a great time to get started. Don't let March pass you by without taking care of you and your family.

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