PTSD and TBI

Identification, Assessment and Treatment in Returning Veterans

Mary Lu and Adam Nelson

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Returning Veterans

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A Special Thank You

Some content courtesy of:

James Sardo, PhD
Lynn Van Male, PhD

Combat/Operational stress

- No real safe area
- Unpredictable threat level
- Periodic unpredictable re-exposure to high stress moments
Relationship Stress

- Long and/or multiple deployments
- Rushed marriages/pregnancies
- Irritability & numbing
- New communication styles
- Pre-existing strains
- Helpless to assist with crises
- People do crazy stuff (wrong things/time/person)

Situational Stress

- Financial problems
- Guard and Reserve with employment and business problems
- Physical/environmental conditions
- General case of helplessness and/or hopelessness
- Disconnect from established support systems, faith communities

PTSD Assessment (DSM-IV)

- Criterion A: Traumatic Stressor
  - Actual/threatened death/serious injury, threat to physical integrity of self/others

- Criterion B: Persistent Reexperiencing (1)
  - Intrusive thoughts, images, perceptions
  - Nightmares/distressing dreams
  - Event recur/flashbacks
  - Intense psychological distress with cue exposure
  - Physiological reactivity upon cue exposure
PTSD Assessment: DSM-IV

• Criterion C: Persistent Avoidance, Numbing of Responsiveness (3)
  – Avoid thoughts, feelings, conversations
  – Avoid activities, places, people
  – Inability to recall important aspect of trauma
  – Diminished interest/participation in activities
  – Feeling detached/estranged from others
  – Restricted range of affect
  – Foreshortened future

PTSD Assessment: DSM-IV

• Criterion D: Persistent Increased Arousal (Hyperarousal) (2)
  – Difficulty falling/staying asleep
  – Irritability/anger outbursts
  – Difficulty concentrating
  – Hypervigilance
  – Exaggerated startle

PTSD Assessment: DSM-IV

• Criterion E: Duration of symptoms >= 1 month

PTSD Assessment: DSM-IV

• Criterion F: Clinically significant distress or impairment
  • Specify if:
    – Acute: Duration of symptoms < 3 months
    – Chronic: Duration of symptoms is >= 3 months
  • Specify if:
    – With Delayed Onset: Symptom onset is at least 6 months after trauma
PTSD: Risk Factors
Kennedy et al, JRRD 44:7, 2007

• Pre-trauma: Previous trauma, psychiatric hx, high hostility, low self efficacy, family hx / genetics

• Peri and post trauma: Trauma severity, social support, life stress, severity of injury, acute symptoms

PTSD: Combat Exposure
From Hoge et al, NEJM 351:1, 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Combat experience (Army)</th>
<th>Iraq</th>
<th>Afghanistan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attacked / ambushed</td>
<td>789/883 (89%)</td>
<td>1139/1961 (58%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Received incoming artillery, rocket, or mortar fire</td>
<td>753/872 (86%)</td>
<td>1648/1980 (84%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shot at or received small arms fire</td>
<td>826/886 (93%)</td>
<td>1302/1962 (66%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible for the death of an enemy combatant</td>
<td>414/871 (48%)</td>
<td>229/1961 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowing someone seriously injured or killed</td>
<td>751/878 (86%)</td>
<td>850/1962 (43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearing or searching homes or buildings</td>
<td>705/884 (80%)</td>
<td>1106/1961 (57%)</td>
</tr>
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PTSD: Combat Exposure
• Among soldiers deployed to Iraq, PTSD prevalence increased linearly with the number of firefights during deployment.

PTSD in Returning Vets
• 3-4 months after return from Iraq:
  • Depression (PHQ): 66/840 (7.9)
  • Anxiety (PHQ): 66/839 (7.9)
  • PTSD (PCL): 114/881 (12.9)
  • Any of the above: 151/882 (17.1)
  • 20-24% reported alcohol misuse.
  • 38-45% of vets with positive screens were interested in receiving help. 23-40% received help in the past year.

Perceived Barriers to Care
Hoge et al, NEJM 351:1, 2004

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Barrier</th>
<th>Positive screen for mental disorder (N=731)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Getting time off work for treatment would be difficult</td>
<td>354/643 (55%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too embarrassing</td>
<td>260/641 (41%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It would harm my career</td>
<td>319/640 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members of my unit would have less confidence in me</td>
<td>377/642 (59%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My unit leadership might treat me differently</td>
<td>403/637 (63%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My leaders would blame me for the problem</td>
<td>328/642 (51%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I would be seen as weak</td>
<td>413/640 (65%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Screening Returning Vets
Milliken, Auchterlonie, Hoge, JAMA 298:18, 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Guard or Reserve PDHA (n = 31885)</th>
<th>Guard or Reserve PDHRA (n = 31885)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PHQ-2, ≥ 1</td>
<td>2874 (4.7)</td>
<td>1210 (3.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTSD screen, ≥ 2</td>
<td>6634 (11.8)</td>
<td>1342 (4.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal conflict</td>
<td>1975 (3.5)</td>
<td>7893 (14.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health referral, EAP referral, or under care for MH</td>
<td>11,429 (20.3)</td>
<td>13515 (42.4)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Assessment: Issues
- Applying for VA disability
- Multiple appointments
- VA OIF/OEF coordinators
- Non-VA service officers
- Military to VA transition
- Importance of social support
- Comorbidities

Evidence: Psychotherapy
- Best evidence: Exposure therapies
  (However, evidence for veterans, especially males with chronic PTSD, is less consistent.)
- Less evidence: EMDR, Cognitive restructuring, Coping skills (including Stress inoculation therapy)
- Least evidence: Eclectic, Hypnotherapy, Psychodynamic, Neurofeedback, group therapies
- Other and New therapies: Mindfulness, Acceptance and Commitment, Seeking Safety (for comorbid D/A), Behavioral Activation, Imagery Rehearsal, Acupuncture, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, Spiritual counseling, etc.
**Evidence: Pharmacotherapy**


- Best evidence: selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (sertraline, fluoxetine, paroxetine, citalopram)?
- Less evidence: alpha adrenergic blockers (prazosin), anticonvulsants (topiramate, tiagabine, lamotrigine), novel antipsychotics (olanzapine, risperidone), benzodiazepines (alprazolam), MAOIs (phenelzine, brolapramine), other antidepressants (imipramine, desipramine, amitriptyline, mirtazapine, nefazodone, venlafaxine), naltrexone, D-cycloserine
- Least evidence: mood stabilizers, buspirone, non-benzodiazepine hypnolics
- Potentially harmful: Benzodiazepines, older antipsychotics.

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**“Stages” of Treatment**

- **Stage I: Current Focus**
  - Skills to manage symptoms
  - Establish safety
- **Stage II: Trauma Focus**
  - Process effects of trauma on beliefs, feelings, and behaviors
- **Stage III: Integration and Meaning**
  - Reintegration into community
  - Moving forward; “AND”

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**PTSD Treatment: Current Focus**

- Symptom management approach
  - Relaxation
  - Support
  - Crisis management
  - Skills for coping
  - Might include behavioral activation, mindfulness practices, DBT

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**PTSD treatment: Trauma focus**

- **Prolonged Exposure** (Foa et al, 2007)
  - 10 sessions
  - Common Reactions to Trauma: psychoeducation about PTSD
  - Breathing retraining
  - In Vivo Exposure: reduce avoidance
  - Imaginal Exposure: habituation and emotional processing
PTSD treatment: Trauma focus

- Cognitive Processing Therapy (Resick & Schnicke, 1992, 1993)
  - 12 sessions
  - Psychoeducation
  - Cognitive therapy – challenging negative beliefs about self or world
  - Disclosure of the trauma - written
  - Explore impact of trauma and negative beliefs in areas of safety, trust, power, self-esteem, and intimacy

PTSD treatment: Reintegration

- Couples and family education / therapy
- Spiritual counseling
- Vocational rehabilitation
- Recreational therapy
- Community service

PTSD: Course


- Community sample: 52% with PTSD at baseline remitted 34-50 months later
- Returning veterans: 59% (2058/3474) with PTSD positive screen at PDHA were negative on PDHRA (approx 6 months later)
- However, 7% with negative screen on PDHA were positive at PDHRA (3697/52876)
  - Delayed PTSD?
  - Initial underreporting of symptoms?

Returning to Work

- Encourage use of all re-constitution time
- Transition back slowly, if possible
- May feel job has become boring
- Work was “simpler” while deployed
- Re-define fulfillment in employment stateside
- Easily frustrated, irritated, or annoyed with work, co-workers, supervisors
- Be realistic and patient…use the same principles used with family/spouse
Returning to Work

- Many co-workers/supervisors may not relate to combat experiences
- Some will not even realize the soldier was deployed!
- Co-workers may resent soldier’s absence
- Re-frame co-workers’ reactions in terms of their frame of reference
- Those left behind may have worked extremely hard as well

PTSD with co-occurring TBI

Kennedy et al, JRRD 44:7, 2007

- Clinical guidelines not yet available.
- CBT-based treatment may be effective in individuals with mild TBI.
- TBI may predispose to medication side effects, main effects, drug interactions, and effects of alcohol or other substances.

PTSD Resources

- National Center for PTSD: www.ncptsd.org/
- Portland Vet Center: 503-273-5370
- Portland VA: 503-220-8262
- Darla Darville, LCSW, Transition Patient Advocate, Ext. 57049
- Victoria Koehler, LCSW OEF/OIF Program Manager, Ext. 57044
- Jeanette Morrison, VVD, LCSW, OEF/OIF Social Work Case Manager, Ext. 57460
- Returning Veterans Project: free counseling and other health services for returning veterans and their families (OR and SW WA)
  http://returningveterans.org/

Traumatic Brain Injury in OEF/OIF Veterans

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What is a TBI?

"A traumatic brain injury (TBI) is caused by a blow or jolt to the head or a penetrating head injury that disrupts the normal function of the brain. Not all blows or jolts to the head result in a TBI. The severity of a TBI may range from "mild" (a brief change in mental status or consciousness) to "severe" (an extended period of unconsciousness or amnesia after the injury)." DVBIC, 2008

Ways to Get a Brain Injury

- Acceleration/Deceleration injuries
  - MVA, Non-ground level falls
  - Diffuse axonal injury
  - Often widespread deficits
- Focal injuries
  - Assaults, GSW, ground level falls
  - Contusions and bleeding
  - Focal deficits

Blast Injuries

**Primary Injury**: Direct exposure to over/under pressurization wave. Air-filled organs especially vulnerable: ear, lung, and GI tract
- Relevant factors: charge strength, proximity to blast, closed vs. open space
- Animal studies and mathematical models suggest that blast waves can cause central nervous system damage; however, we are far from understanding the conditions under which this may occur when there is not acute diagnosable concussion.

**Secondary, Tertiary Blast Injuries**:
- Also vulnerable to focal and diffuse injuries from contact with debris/shrapnel and displacement from injury

Signature Wound

- Around 15-20% OIF/OEF veterans meeting criteria for TBI (WRAMC, 2006; Hoge et al., 2008)
- Between January 2003 and March 31, 2008 DVBIC military, VA and civilian sites combined have seen a total of 6,602 patients with TBI. (DVBIC, 2008)
### Classifying Severity of Injury

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Severity</th>
<th>LOC</th>
<th>PTA</th>
<th>GCS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mild</td>
<td>&lt;30 min</td>
<td>&lt;6 hrs</td>
<td>13-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>&lt;6 hrs</td>
<td>&lt;7 days</td>
<td>9-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe</td>
<td>&gt;6 hrs</td>
<td>&gt;7 days</td>
<td>3-8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

LOC = loss of consciousness  
PTA = post traumatic amnesia  
GCS = Glasgow Coma Scale  
VA TBI publication, 2004

### Identification at the VA

- **Primary Screening**
  - All VA providers mandated to screen  
  - Positive initial screens go to...
- **Secondary Screening**
  - Multi-disciplinary treatment team  
  - PC, Rehab Med, MH, SW  
  - Referred for further specialty evaluation and treatment  
    - Neurology, Neuropsychology, Audiology, ENT  
- Vast majority present with mild TBI  
  - >95% of my referrals mild  
  - Moderate and severe cases have obvious LOC and subsequent confusion  
  - Easier to catch in field  
  - Sent to major VA TBI inpatient treatment sites (4 nationwide)

### Challenges of Identification

- Self report, often years later  
- Impossible to know if LOC without witness (could be conscious with PTA)  
- “Dazed and confused”  
- Concussion often without obvious sign of injury  
- Unlikely to report concussion to medic

### Challenges of Diagnosis

- **Symptom overlap**
  - Deployment is associated with cognitive changes (Storzbach et al., 2000; Vasterling et al., 2006)  
  - PTSD is associated with cognitive changes (Vasterling & Brailey, 2005)  
  - Depression is associated with cognitive changes (Zakzanis et al., 1999)  
  - Somatic complaints secondary to physical trauma often identical to “post-concussive” symptoms (Meares et al., 2008)
Identification

- Given symptom overlap...
- Best way to identify continues to be symptoms present at injury:
  - Acute mental status change, acute post-concussive symptoms
- Persistent PCS are present in other conditions

Neuropsychological Assessment

- History
  - Presenting problem, developmental, educational, medical, psychiatric, social, substance use, coping with past adversity
  - Interview spouse or other family members
- Test behavior
  - Motivation/effort, pain, fatigue, mood, vision, hearing
Neuropsychological Assessment

- Cognitive testing
  - Intellectual functioning, attention, memory, language, motor skills, executive functioning
  - Compare with expected range of performance for this individual based on demographics (age, ed)
  - Look for patterns consistent with brain injury

- Impressions
  - Is there evidence of TBI?
  - If so, is there evidence of a cognitive disorder or mood/personality change?
  - If so, is the cognitive disorder or mood/personality change likely due to TBI?

- Recommendations
  - Any further workup recommended?
  - Cognitive recommendations: Rehab candidate?
  - Mental Health: Are they treating co-morbid psychiatric symptoms?
  - Pain, sleep management: Are these optimized?
  - Reassessment?

Recovery

- The majority (80-90%) of individuals in civilian studies recover from a concussion (mild TBI) but...
- Not a reasonable comparison to deployment
  - Mental stress (always on guard, combat trauma)
  - Physical stress (100+ lbs pack, heat, dehydration)
  - Lack of rest
  - Increased vulnerability to more concussion
- Factors associated with delayed recovery
  - Prior psychiatric history, co-morbid depression/anxiety, pain, sleep disorder, substance abuse
  - Coping style + natural recovery = fx

Common symptoms associated with TBI

- Physical
  - Headaches
  - Dizziness
  - Balance/coordination changes
  - Pain (co-morbid in majority of my patients)
  - Low energy
  - Fatigue
  - Sleep disturbance (high rate sleep disorders)

However, very likely to see these symptoms in trauma victims without TBI. Not specific to concussion.
Common symptoms associated with TBI

**Emotional**
- Anxiety (including PTS)
- Depression
- Irritability
- Emotional dysregulation
- Less range of emotion
- Less sensitive to others’ emotions

**ADJUSTMENT TO INJURY**
+ **ORGANIC BRAIN CHANGES**

**Cognitive**
- Memory (short-term)
- Attention (complex tasks, distraction)
- Information processing efficiency
- Word finding
- Executive functions (e.g. planning, organizing, multi-tasking, strategizing)

**Behavioral**
- Impulsivity
- Disinhibition (less filter)
  - or
- Apathy
- Lack of initiation
- Lack of spontaneity

**Consequences on Daily Functioning**
- Social
  - Spouses/Life partners: Person may seem different (in any of previously mentioned domains)
  - Family: May have different role in family now
  - Friends: May not enjoy, or be able to perform, same activities as before
Consequences on Daily Functioning

- Occupational
  - Returning to work often a challenge
  - Often early in careers with many earning years ahead
  - Role change as “provider”
  - May not have received compensation for injury
  - May require assistance with ADL/IADL

Treatment

- No FDA approved medications specifically for TBI symptom management
- Stimulants, SSRI’s, cholinesterase inhibitors used at discretion of prescriber
  - Review of psychological treatments for civilian m-TBI
  - Some evidence for early education intervention (when? What? How much?)
  - No clear empirically supported treatment for veterans with m-TBI

- Symptom-based practical interventions:
  - Evidence from moderate-to-severe TBI that Cognitive Rehabilitation Groups are helpful (Vanderploeg et al., 2008; Cicerone et al., 2002)
  - Individualized cognitive rehab for those with attention disorders (Sohlberg & Mateer, 1989)
  - Pain management
  - MH treatment
  - Vocational Rehabilitation
  - Social/Family/Community support

Hoge et al., 2008

- NEJM 358; 5
- Based on 2006 anonymous survey of 4618 soldiers from two U.S. Army combat infantry brigades
- N= 2,525 U.S. Army infantry soldiers 3-4 mo. After year-long deployment to Iraq
  - 95.5% male
  - 55.5 % under age 30
  - 47.5% of junior rank

Hoge et al., 2008 cont.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Injury with LOC</th>
<th>Injury with altered MS</th>
<th>Injury without concussion</th>
<th>No injury</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N=124</td>
<td>N=260</td>
<td>N=435</td>
<td>N=1706</td>
<td>P value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with PTSD</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with DEP</td>
<td>22.9</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Hoge et al., 2008

• Poor health, missed work, medical visits, PCS complaints endorsed more by those with TBI than without

• However... TBI no longer significantly associated with these variables (except headache) after controlling for PTSD and depression

Resources

• DVBIC
dvbic.com
1.800.870.9244

• Portland VA Medical Center
903.220.8262

• Brain Injury Association of Oregon
http://www.biaoregon.org/
503.740.3156
1.800.544.5243

• Brain Injury Association of Washington
http://www.biawa.org/contact.htm
1.800.523.5438