

Acquired Injuries and Reasonable Accommodations

"I was open with my boss about my disability. I was terrified to talk to him about it at first, but then I realized that in order for me to be successful, he needed to know how to help me when I needed it. I'm not going to sugarcoat it; it is hard to tell someone about your injuries, even harder admitting that you have a problem. Once I told him, it felt like a 200 pound weight fell off of my shoulders. No one can help you if they don't know the issue."

- Retired U.S. Army Capt. Mark Tippett

Due to advances in military medicine and protective equipment, increased numbers of Service members are surviving the injuries they sustain on the battlefield, in training accidents, and in other incidents in the line of duty. However, the changing combat landscape has created a shift in the type and range of injuries experienced. While most Americans are aware of injuries such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and traumatic brain injury (TBI), the reality of both obvious and non-apparent injuries is that recovery and transition is a very personal journey for every servicemember.

In order to eliminate stigma and misconception, it is important that employers have a basic understanding of some of the more frequently recorded injuries experienced by today's military community. While no two veterans living with acquired injuries will experience the same functional limitations or need for accommodation, what follows are some suggestions that may promote a more informed and productive workforce.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a behavioral health injury—and a pure human reaction to trauma or an extreme traumatic event. Anyone who has experienced a life-threatening event can, but will not necessarily, develop PTSD. These events may include combat or military exposure, child sexual or physical abuse, terrorist attacks, sexual or physical assault, serious accidents (such as car wreck), or natural disasters (such as fire, tornado, hurricane, flood or earthquake). For some Service members and veterans, symptoms of PTSD include re-experiencing the traumatic event, avoiding situations that remind them of the event, difficulty sleeping, and hyper-arousal.

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is defined as a blow or jolt to the head or a penetrating head injury that disrupts the function of the brain. Not all blows or jolts

Sample Accommodations for PTSD

- Use a daily or weekly task list
- Reduce distractions in the work environment
- Allow the employee to listen to music using a headset
- Divide large assignments into smaller goal-oriented tasks or steps
- Assign a supervisor, manager or mentor to answer employee's questions
- Allow telephone calls during work hours to doctors and others for needed support
- Allow for a flexible start time or end time, or work from home
- Allow time off for counseling and medical appointments

Sample Accommodations for TBI

- Permit flexible scheduling, allow longer or more frequent work breaks
- Provide additional time to learn new responsibilities
- Provide for job-sharing opportunities
- Encourage the employee to use daily 'to-do' lists and check items off as they are completed
- Use technology or special calendars to mark meetings and deadlines
- Assign a mentor to assist in determining goals and provide daily guidance
- Provide both written and verbal instructions

to the head result in a TBI. The severity of such an injury may range from mild/concussion (a brief change in mental status or consciousness) to "severe," (an extended period of unconsciousness or amnesia after the injury). A TBI can result in short or long-term problems although most people with TBI are able to function independently.

While PTSD and TBI are very different injuries, many of the functional limitations associated with both tend to be similar. Fortunately, many of the accommodations often found helpful are easy to implement, low or no cost, and typically involve good management practices.

Orthopedic combat-related injuries may include, but are not limited to spinal cord injuries, bone fractures, back injuries, and loss of limb. The functional limitations experienced by those living with orthopedic injuries are likely to change over time and, therefore, may require a series of accommodations. It is important for the veteran employee and supervisor to commit to an accommodation follow-up plan.

Sensory impairments such as those related to vision and hearing, are often associated with military experience. Sensory impairments may present as, but will not be limited to functional limitations related to vision impairments, blindness, hearing loss, or deafness. Accommodations for sensory impairments will vary, but may focus on access to technology, documentation, and the need for support services.

Severe burns may not be an injury where one might expect accommodations would be necessary, but functional limitations associated with fine or gross motor skills, sensitivity to temperature (both heat and cold), prolonged exposure to sunlight, handling stress and emotions, and issues related to sleep disorders are not atypical for those with burn injuries.

The Reasonable Accommodations Process: Be a Proactive and Informed Employer

Establish and make known a process for requesting accommodations, at every point in the employment process – from application to onboarding to retention and promotion. It is good management practice to inform all new hires, regardless of disability or perceived need, of the process for requesting accommodations at every point in the employment process.

Create a process for requesting job accommodations that lets all current and prospective employees know your company is committed to equal access and opportunity. Ensuring this information is made available in multiple formats is a great step toward creating a more inclusive and universally accessible workplace.

Questions to Ask During the Reasonable Accommodations Process

1. What limitation is the veteran experiencing?
2. How do these limitations impact the veteran and his/her job performance?
3. What specific job tasks are problematic as a result of these limitations?
4. What accommodations are available to reduce or eliminate these problems? Are all potential resources being used to determine possible accommodations?
5. Has the veteran been consulted regarding possible accommodations?
6. Once accommodations are in place, would it be useful to meet with the veteran to evaluate the effectiveness of the accommodations and to determine whether additional accommodations are needed?
7. Do supervisory personnel and employees need disability-related education and training?

Understand that one of the biggest challenges faced by those experiencing the impact of a non-apparent disability is whether or not to disclose this information to a prospective or current employer. Many veterans believe disclosing such information will have negative consequences on their careers.

Add to this equation the fact that we are living in a time when people are working longer, an aging workforce is more likely to acquire a disability and need accommodations to continue to be productive. Now more than ever, employers are making known the process for requesting and accessing workplace accommodations. By being upfront and transparent with this process, you will surely alleviate stress—and create a more productive workforce.

Job Accommodation Network (JAN)

The Job Accommodation Network, a Department of Labor program, offers free, confidential guidance on workplace accommodations and disability employment issues for all individuals with disabilities, including wounded, ill, and injured veterans. JAN consultants offer one-on-one guidance on accommodations, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) issues, and other areas to both private and federal employers.

Army Warrior Care and Transition Program (WCTP) and Army Wounded Warrior Program (AW2)

WCTP and the Army Wounded Warrior Program (AW2) can also help educate your human resources personnel, supervisors/managers, and other employees on the trends of common injury types. Both can also connect you with resources for reasonable accommodation and facilitate a conversation with supervisors and the veterans on the accommodations that may be most effective for the individual.

Contact Us

The first step to increasing your organization's hiring of disabled veterans is to contact the Warrior Care and Transition Program. Contact us—we're here to help make this process easier.

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