



Intimate Partner Violence and Traumatic Brain Injuries

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What is a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)?

TBIs are “acquired” brain injuries resulting from blunt force to the head, face or neck, or suffocation. Examples of TBIs associated with intimate partner violence (IPV) include concussions, chronic traumatic encephalopathy (brain condition caused by repeated blows to the head), and hypoxic-ischemic encephalopathy (injury due to loss of oxygen to the brain for an extended period).

What are common symptoms of a TBI?

TBIs can range from mild to severe. Common symptoms of mild TBIs include mood changes, seizures, sleep difficulties, physical problems (e.g., dizziness, headaches), and cognitive difficulties (e.g., memory problems, difficulty concentrating). Although mild TBIs tend to be the most common, moderate to severe forms of TBIs can cause significant long-term physical and cognitive impairments and, in some cases, be fatal.

How can TBIs impact a survivor?

While some individuals recover within the first three months following a TBI, others can continue to struggle with TBI symptoms and cognitive difficulties for months or years after the injury. Survivors of IPV and TBIs might also struggle with chronic pain, anxiety and depression, and/or alcohol and drug-related problems.

How common are TBIs?

Studies show that between 19% and 75% of survivors suffer from a TBI. However, it is important to recognize that face, neck, and head injuries are the most common physical injuries among survivors of IPV.

Unfortunately, mild TBIs, such as concussions, can often be missed by clinicians and survivors. Moreover, these symptoms can make it more difficult for survivors to leave abusive relationships.

What to do if you suspect you, or someone you know, might have a TBI?

Seek medical care as soon as possible. In Ontario, local shelters and crisis centres for survivors of IPV often have counsellors who can provide accompaniments to medical settings to support survivors if requested. Even if the abuse is historic, if there were any injuries to the face, head, or neck, it might be helpful to get an evaluation from a physician to ensure that a potential TBI is not missed. If a TBI is present, a medical health professional can support the management of both the short- and long-term impacts of the injury.

Call EMS/911 if the symptoms are severe or life-threatening. Possible severe or life-threatening symptoms associated with TBIs include:

- Loss of consciousness or responsiveness, or difficulty staying awake
- Difficulties with physical coordination (e.g., stumbling, falling over, disorientation)
- Bruising around the eyes or behind the ears
- Blood or fluid coming from ears or nose
- Blurry or double vision or complete loss of vision
- Dilated pupils or pupils of unequal size
- Sudden confusion, restlessness, or agitation
- Sudden slurred speech or difficulty speaking
- Seizures
- Loss of control of bladder or bowels
- Repeated or projectile vomiting
- Severe or worsening headache

Please note that this list of symptoms is not exhaustive. If unsure about the severity of symptoms, it is always best to access medical care for injuries to the face, neck, or head to confirm that potential severe or life-threatening symptoms are not missed.