



TBI TODAY

News, Ideas, and Resources from the Virginia TBI Model System

Overcoming Obstacles to Returning to Work After Brain Injury

If you have a desire to be more productive or go back to work, then you have a lot in common with many persons who are recovering from a brain injury. The statements below are from real people and show some of the obstacles they face in getting back to work after injury:

"I have memory and balance problems, but I still have to support my family."

OR

"I used to make \$28 per hour. Now, the only job I can get pays \$6.50."

OR

"I'm not sure what I can do, but I have to do something."

After a brain injury it may take a long time to get back to work or being active. There are several reasons for this.

- The healing process itself can take as long as two years or more.
- Feeling tired a good deal of the time is a frequent complaint. This common challenge following brain injury can make it difficult to get back on track. If you are tired, it can feel like an effort to just get up and get dressed, let alone go to a job site.
- It also may take you longer to accomplish such things as dressing, grooming, and organizing yourself to get out the door.
- A negative outlook and self-talk can also prevent you from trying out work or other activities.

To see if you have some things standing between you and more fulfilling activities or jobs, try taking the following questionnaire:

What's Holding You Back?

Read each statement and check each one that you feel applies to you.

I don't think I can get along with other people in a work setting.	___
I don't have any energy!	___
I feel like I can't reach my goals for going back to work.	___
I just can't seem to get organized.	___
I worry that my memory problems will make it hard for me to get work.	___
Pain keeps me up at night so I feel sleepy all day.	___
I don't know what I should tell people about my injury.	___
I am waiting to get the same kind of job I did before my brain injury!	___
I am worried that my volunteer work won't count.	___
I usually need a helper to get up, dressed, and out in the morning.	___



If you checked many, about half, or even a few boxes, you may have some challenges and obstacles that the following ideas could help you overcome.

Top 8 Tips for Overcoming Obstacles to Going to Work or Becoming More Active

- Aim for regular sleeping and waking times
- Choose waking and sleeping times during the week days that are similar to those that regular employees keep. For example: Getting up at 7 a.m. may allow enough time to get ready, eat breakfast, and get to work if your work day is 8:30 to 4:30.
- Notice what time of day you get the most tired. Build in a short rest break at that time. Drink a not-too-sugary sports drink and eat an energy bar or peanut butter crackers.
- Stay away from the television unless it is a weekend and you have finished your daily tasks.
- Keep set habits and routines: lay out clothes at night for the next day, make your lunch the night before, stick to a regular schedule, do all grooming each day early at a set time.
- Pace yourself, don't race yourself!
- Use a list of steps when you do complicated tasks to help you fight fatigue.
- Keep a Positive Outlook! Avoid negative self talk and have realistic goals.



So whether your goal is to get a paying part- or full-time job or to just become more active and productive, setting a clock to keep regular working hours, using a task list and schedule, and working on your confidence and positivity will be steps in the best direction. The worksheet “My Typical Day” is another tool that can help you learn about your personal obstacles to returning to work or activity. Fill the form out honestly to learn if you do too much or too little, get too tired, don't eat right, or stay up too late and don't get enough rest. When you have finished, see if you can work on changing some habits and building in routines that will move you toward your goals.

My Week	My Activities	When do I get tired?	Meal Times	When I go to bed
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				
Saturday				
Sunday				

Now you know more about your personal obstacles and challenges to returning to work or a more productive daily life. Some of these, like fatigue, a negative outlook, disorganization, and difficulty with maintaining a routine, can be overcome. You have learned some things about your own obstacles to getting off the couch and out the door to accomplish your work and activity goals! Keep working on your weekly schedule and habits until you find your energy and self-talk improving.

(Synopsis of material from **Choosing, Finding, and Keeping a Job After Brain Injury**, Janet Niemeier, Jeffrey Kreutzer, and Shy Degrace, 2009)

With permission of the authors, this article has been reprinted from the Winter 2010 issue of *TBI Today*, published by Virginia Commonwealth University's Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation's Neuropsychology Service. This newsletter, is a project of the Virginia Model System, which is funded by the US Department of Education's National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR). The views, opinions, and information presented herein are those of the publisher and are not necessarily endorsed by the US Dept of Education.