



Managing Chronic Pain for Employment After Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

Chronic pain is a common challenge after a traumatic brain injury (TBI). Chronic pain after TBI can affect performance at work.

Symptoms of Chronic Pain at Work After TBI

Headaches can lead to lower productivity at work and make work tasks take longer to complete. For example, people may have

- a hard time focusing during meetings, writing reports, or completing detail-oriented tasks;
- severe migraines that cause them to leave work early or miss full days of work; or
- Pain from headaches can sometimes cause visual changes making it difficult to operate equipment

Nerve damage may cause delays in reflexes and sensations. This can cause challenges at work. For example:

- Numbness and tingling can affect typing, writing, and the use of tools at work.
- Pain and reduced sensation may limit walking, standing, or moving around at work.
- Delayed reflexes or issues with coordination can affect tasks that are safety-sensitive.

Muscle stiffness can limit range of motion, making it harder to function at work. For example:

- Trouble with bending, reaching, or lifting can affect physical activities at work.
- Long meetings or desk work may cause pain can reduce endurance.
- Physical discomfort can make routine tasks take more effort and time.



Tips for Managing Chronic Pain at Work

- Maintain **good posture**.
- Do some **gentle exercises** or relaxation techniques at work to lessen pain.
- Use **memory aids** to manage cognitive issues related to pain after TBI. These may include sticky notes, reminders, or apps.
- Ask for **ergonomic adjustments** at work or at your workstation. This may include special seating, a standing desk and cushioned floormats, or voice-to-text software. These changes can reduce physical and mental strain at work.
- Use **assistive devices** to reduce sensory overload and headaches. This may include noise-canceling headphones and blue light filter glasses.
- Explore **flexible work arrangements** to lessen the challenges that stem from chronic pain. This could include remote work or a modified schedule.
- Take **regular breaks** to stretch, move, and prevent stiffness.
- **Prioritize tasks** by working on the most difficult tasks when you have more energy and less pain.

Coping Strategies Outside of Work

Adopting healthy lifestyle habits and coping strategies outside of work can have a positive impact on your work performance. Approaches include:

- » Practice **mindfulness, meditation, or breathing exercises**. Any of these methods can help you manage stress and your perception of pain.
- » Use **hot or cold compresses** on the area that hurts.
- » Take part in activities that promote **resilience**. This may include writing in a journal or other creative hobbies.
- » **Seek help from health professionals** such as a psychologist to develop coping strategies.
- » **Keep a pain diary** which may help identify symptoms and triggers to better manage pain and reflect on daily challenges. It can also provide a more accurate record to share with your healthcare providers.
- » **Join a support group** to connect with others who have similar experiences and share coping strategies.
- » **Seek help from health professionals** such as a psychologist to develop coping strategies.



Tips for Managing Chronic Pain While Looking for a Job

Chronic pain after TBI may hinder your search for a job. Try these tips to reduce pain when looking for a job:

- » **Figure out the time of day your pain is lowest**. Complete your job search tasks and schedule job interviews during that time.
- » **Keep job search tasks short** (10–20 minutes). Take breaks in between.
- » **Pace yourself** and stop *before* your pain spikes, not after.

Real Life Experience

After her TBI, **Paula** found that pain and exhaustion began to shape the way she navigated her workday as a professor. As she described, “I’ll still get the dull pain, especially if I do too much, if I work too hard.” She has built recovery time into her daily routine to manage her energy. She explained, “When the pain becomes too much, I take a half an hour break and go sit somewhere quiet.”



Special Note: You may need support or accommodations from your employer for some of the strategies in this resource. It is up to you whether you want to disclose that you have had a TBI. You can decide which ideas in this resource feel right for you based on your own comfort level and your workplace situation.

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