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[LifeStyle](#)

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[ViewPoint](#)

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[Music](#)

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End the War's Cognitive Carnage

by Patricia Block

Much has been made about the number of American soldiers who have died in the war on Iraq – over 1,500 and counting. This sad statistic begs the question: Why isn't more attention paid to the thousands of other casualties?

According to the Department of Defense, the number wounded in action as of March 18, 2005 is 11,442. Viewed alongside another ugly statistic – as many as two-thirds of all soldiers wounded in Iraq sustained a traumatic brain injury (TBI) – this means that over 7,550 soldiers have suffered brain damage.

A November 2004 article by Rick Kelly on the World Socialist Web Site reported that many wounds are due to the advanced body armor and helmets now used by U.S. forces: "As the death rate of wounded troops has declined compared to previous conflicts, the rate of TBI has shot up. The nature of the Iraq war has also increased the number of brain injuries. Rocket propelled grenades, mortars, and other explosive devices cause concussive shock blasts damaging to the brain."

If you belong to the large and growing number of TBI survivors, then you know that suffering a traumatic brain injury – please, let's agree to banish use of the word concussion – may be experienced as a fate worse than death. No one likes to talk about it but, just as the U.S. military is experiencing a very high rate of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among troops where many of the symptoms are similar to traumatic brain injury, soldiers suffering from psychological disorders, along with TBI survivors, have high rates of alcohol and drug abuse, and suicide. Why is that?

Here are some facts: Impairments associated with even mild traumatic brain injury (an oxymoron, wouldn't you say?) may be permanent and devastating, especially when it comes to the brain's "executive functions" – i.e., planning, identifying priorities, sequencing steps to complete a task and monitoring one's own behavior. The ability to absorb information, think, process and respond is dramatically diminished. A victim feels overwhelmed with tasks that were simple before the injury.

Even if a soldier suffered only a mild injury to his or her brain's frontal lobes, he or she will experience some degree of the following functional deficits: poor planning and organization, concrete thinking, distractibility, cognitive rigidity, reduced self-awareness, and poor judgment. In practical terms, this means that the individual will become overwhelmed by the complexity of work requiring multiple steps; continue to use a strategy that has repeatedly shown to be ineffective; become easily frustrated when difficulties are encountered; have difficulty controlling anger, tears, happiness or sorrow—all emotional expression may be exaggerated; and have difficulty making a decision when faced with several choices.

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TBI survivors also often experience dramatic psychosocial outcomes and personality changes expressed through certain behaviors and emotions including aggression, irritability, depression, anxiety, mood swings, coldness, cruelty, temper, restlessness, and decreased energy and enthusiasm.

For many, this loss in capability, behavioral deficits and excess emotional baggage result in loss of self.

The San Francisco Chronicle reported on Sgt. 1st Class Alec Giess, of the Oregon National Guard, whose truck rolled over him as it crashed while avoiding a suspected land mine. Geiss' wife, Shana, noticed after his return that the easygoing, relaxed dad who went to Iraq had become a quick-tempered man who couldn't remember the family's daily schedule, jumped up screaming when the family cat landed on his bed and couldn't tolerate crowds. The world inside his head, Giess said, was even stranger: he felt bewildered, with no sense of time other than 'daytime' and 'nighttime.' He also felt cut off from his emotions. 'When my kids come and hug me, I don't feel a thing,' he said."

I hate to admit it, but I do understand the matchstick flash that occurs in a TBI survivor's brain – the low frustration tolerance and inability to sort out and calmly process too many sights, sounds and information. The overload of environmental stimuli simply overwhelms my brain's ability to absorb, process and respond in a constructive – instead of a destructive – fashion. The end result: After an incredibly fatiguing day at work, where I've spent 10 hours forcing my brain to think, respond and process the world in a way that used to happen automatically, I feel like throttling my cat when he won't stop howling for food – and, immediately following my head injury, used to. Today, close to eighteen years after the injury, my cat thankfully escapes the same punishment. Even so, when it comes to TBI, time does not heal all wounds.

By 2007, will another 7,550 soldiers have suffered a traumatic brain injury? A way must be found to end the war and stop this heartbreaking cognitive carnage.

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Patricia Block:

Patricia Block is a marketing, communications and PR consultant, freelance writer and former leader of support group for survivors of traumatic brain injury (TBI). She is currently writing a novel about a woman who rebuilds her damaged brain and shattered self after suffering a near-fatal accident and brain injury.

pblock@blockconsulting.net

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