

# **2026 Nebraska Brain Injury Conference**

## Presentation Descriptions

**Thursday, March 19**

- Opening Keynote:

### **Structured Flexibility and the Development of a Meaningful Life**

Presenter: Tim Feeney, Ph.D

*Description:* The purpose of this presentation is to provide a framework for the development of positive, personal, and meaningful support for individuals with complex behavioral needs. Included in this framework are methods for developing supports that focus on meaningful engagement in chosen life activities, creating positive personal identities, and the development of scripts for positive interaction. Moreover, the reality of successful intervention within this framework requires movement away from a focus on diagnostics (or a disability oriented approach) to the implementation of a flexible functional approach that will likely change over time. This requires the development of an overarching framework of inquiry wherein theories are developed and then objectively tested, allowing for the inclusion of a variety of clinical approaches to any intervention. Essential to this framework is the commitment of all those who provide

- 10-11 a.m. Breakout Sessions:

### **Practical Strategies and Smart Device Integration for Executive Function**

Presenter: Michelle Ranae Wild, M.A.

*Description:* independence and improving their quality of life. This presentation focuses on providing practical solutions to address common executive function challenges faced by this community. Attendees will learn practical techniques to enhance memory, organization, and time management skills, specifically tailored for individuals living with brain injury. The session will emphasize the role of smart devices in supporting these skills, offering tools to maintain focus amidst distractions, improve memory, manage tasks, and organize information. Through live demonstrations, participants will learn how to customize smart device features to address specific executive function challenges, such as planning, prioritizing, and self-monitoring. These strategies are designed to be accessible and user-friendly, ensuring that individuals with brain injuries can effectively integrate them into their daily routines. Attendees will leave the session with actionable strategies and technological solutions to enhance their executive function capabilities, leading to improved independence and personal effectiveness.

This session is ideal for brain injury survivors, caregivers, and professionals seeking to optimize cognitive skills and harness the power of technology for better executive function management.

### **The Role of Chiropractic Care in Treating Brain Injuries**

Presenter: Mark Knoll, D.C.

Description: Historically, there has not been a focus on early concussion/mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI) interventions as most patients with these types of brain injuries have clinically recovered in 10-14 days. However, for individuals with persistent symptoms after 10-14 days, interventions including psychological, cervical and vestibular rehabilitation are now recommended. □ In this presentation, Dr. Knoll explores the latest research related to the cervical spine, concussion/mTBI management and the role that chiropractic treatment may play as part of the healthcare team in rehabilitation of these patients.

- 11:15-12:15 p.m. Breakout Sessions

### **Medicaid Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) Waiver Updates**

Presenter: Colin Large, M.A.

Description: This presentation will provide updates on Nebraska's Medicaid Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS) 1915(c) waivers, with a focus on the Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) Waiver. Topics will include waiver eligibility, the application process, and details of the upcoming TBI waiver amendment. Participants will gain a clearer understanding of current program requirements and future changes impacting individuals and providers.

### **There's Always Something That Works: The Importance of Optimism, Hope, and Meaning in Rehabilitation**

Presenter: Tim Feeney, Ph.D

Description:

- 1:30-2:30 p.m. General Session

### **Breaking Barriers, Building Futures: Harnessing Behavioral Health for Justice-Involved Youth**

Presenter: Erika Franta, Ph.D & Abril Rangel-Pacheco, PhD, LMHP

Description: Youth in the juvenile justice system face profound challenges across mental health, education, and social development. These difficulties often stem from trauma, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and systemic inequities that disproportionately affect youth of color and youth with disabilities. Notably, research indicates that as many as 50% of justice-involved youth have experienced a traumatic brain injury (TBI), which can further complicate emotional regulation, impulse control, and learning—making responsive behavioral health strategies even more critical. Rather than framing these challenges as deficits, a behavioral health approach provides a solution-focused lens that acknowledges each youth's capacity for growth, skill-building, and resilience. Research demonstrates that behaviors can be modified, and social-emotional skills can be strengthened through structured interventions involving repetition, immediate feedback, and reinforcement (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2014). This perspective shifts the narrative from punitive responses toward rehabilitation and education, promoting evidence-based strategies that empower youth to succeed both in and beyond the juvenile justice system. Despite an overall decline in youth incarceration rates, racial and ethnic disparities persist, with Black and Hispanic youth facing disproportionately higher incarceration rates (Mental Health America, 2024). Additionally, approximately 70% of detained youth are diagnosed with one or more mental health conditions, including anxiety, depression, trauma-related disorders, and behavioral disorders, often exacerbated by abuse, neglect, and social instability (NDTAC, 2024; OJP, 2000). Many of these youth also struggle with learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, or cognitive delays that affect their ability to engage successfully in education. Yet, access to appropriate mental health and academic support within detention facilities remains inconsistent. Without targeted intervention, these unmet needs increase the likelihood of recidivism and long-term adverse outcomes. Through a behavioral health lens, professionals assess the root causes of detained youths' behaviors, distinguishing trauma-related responses, potential history of brain injury, and neurodevelopmental concerns from defiance and identifying underlying cognitive or emotional difficulties. Behavioral health evaluations do more than diagnose challenges, they also serve as roadmaps for targeted interventions that build essential skills. Research indicates that behavioral and learning interventions, when applied consistently and reinforced through structured guidance, effectively support detained youth in developing self-regulation, executive functioning, and adaptive coping mechanisms. Behavioral techniques such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), trauma-informed care, positive reinforcement systems, and structured social-emotional learning have been shown to improve mental health outcomes, enhance resilience, and promote academic achievement (Gagnon & Barber, 2019; González, Etow & De la Vaga, 2019). This presentation will highlight lessons learned from a Behavioral Health Initiative Psychological Evaluation Team development process, discuss practical implementation strategies, and examine how behavioral health-informed assessments

enhance reintegration efforts for detained youth. Participants will gain insights into best practices for developing individualized intervention plans that address mental health, trauma, and academic challenges using solution-focused, evidence-based approaches. Special attention will be given to how multi-agency collaboration can reshape juvenile justice practices, fostering rehabilitation and long-term success for affected youth.

- 2:50-3:50 p.m. Breakout Sessions

### **Back to Work, Forward with Support: Navigating Accommodations After Brain Injury**

Presenter: Keri Bennett, PhD, LMHP , Cassy Kcasnicka, Rich McGall

Description: Returning to work after a brain injury can be challenging—but it's not only possible, it's often transformative. This session explores how individuals with brain injuries can re-enter the workforce successfully with the support of Nebraska VR services, self-advocacy, and the implementation of reasonable accommodations under the ADA. Presenters will share insights from both the service provider and employer outreach perspectives, highlighting practical tools, examples of accommodations, and key strategies for fostering productive conversations about disability and work.

### **Walking Forward: Evolving Strategies for Mobility Rehabilitation Following Stroke**

Presenters: Dan Pierce, M.D., CHCQM, Jessica Tucker, Kassandra Pichler, Cari Carlson

Description: Stroke rehabilitation is rapidly evolving, with growing emphasis on early mobility, high-intensity training, and the use of specialized equipment to maximize recovery. This interdisciplinary session will highlight advancements in mobility rehabilitation for individuals with stroke across the continuum of care, from critical care through post-acute rehabilitation. Drawing on clinical experience and ongoing research at our institutions, presenters will discuss practical strategies for initiating mobility early, delivering effective gait interventions in rehabilitation settings, and building the systems and resources needed to support these programs. Attendees will gain a practical framework for applying evidence-informed approaches to stroke gait recovery in their own practice.

- 4-5:15 p.m. General Session

### **Ambiguous Loss Panel**

Presenters: Penny Costello, Lisa Janssen, Thomas Brown, BS CBIST, Jenni VanCleave

Description: This panel explores ambiguous loss in the context of brain injury through the lived experiences of individuals with brain injuries and their caregivers. Participants will share perspectives on navigating identity changes, shifting family roles, emotional uncertainty, and the invisible nature of brain injury. Through personal stories and facilitated discussion, the session highlights the complexity of grief, resilience, and adaptation, offering insights for professionals seeking to better understand and support families living with the ongoing realities of brain injury.

## **Friday, March 20**

- 8:15-9:15 a.m. General Session

### **Assistive Technology in the New Era: Empowering Individuals with TBI**

Presenters: Olivia Ollis , OTR/L & Kelsey Jo Wagner, M.S., CCC-SLP

Description: This presentation explores the evolving role of assistive technology (AT) in supporting individuals with traumatic brain injury (TBI) across multiple environments — including the home, community, computer use, and safety contexts. Participants will examine real-world case studies highlighting how AT solutions promote independence, improve safety, and enhance daily functioning. The session will also feature a curated review of high-usability, consumer-based technologies that can be easily integrated into everyday life. Attendees will leave with practical strategies and resource recommendations to guide the effective implementation of AT for individuals navigating life after TBI.

- 9:30-10:30 a.m. Breakout Sessions

### **Ageing with (and without) brain injury**

Presenter: Judy Harvey, Ph.D. CCC-SLP

Description: The media often portrays aging and dementia as one in the same conditions. While it is true that the brain changes with age, dementia, Alzheimer's, and confusion are not the norm for individuals who are typically aging. So, what cognitive changes can be expected with age? And what if you're not in the "typically aging" category, but living with the effects of a brain injury? Because brain injury often results in life-long cognitive challenges, are people with brain injury at a higher risk for dementia? This is a common question. The aim of this presentation is to summarize recent research regarding aging and cognition for both typical individuals and those aging with brain injury. The presenter will discuss research findings regarding the effectiveness of cognitive interventions, as well as engage the audience in cognitive strategy training.

## **Sexual Health: Let's Talk About Sex...No, Really. Let's Talk About It.**

Presenters: Wendy Sully, Ph.D., Laura Bergevin, MSW

Description: Sexual health and intimacy are important yet often overlooked topics after neurological events. These topics are identified by both the practitioner and patient as central to a fulfilling life and daily living. This presentation will explore societal attitudes toward sexuality, and the impact that may have on individuals who have experienced brain injury. We support rehabilitation approaches that are whole-person centered and will explore strategies utilized within our own rehabilitation model.

- 10:50-11:50 a.m. General Session

## **Wise Mind - Resource Facilitation Panel**

Presenters: Shir Smith, Gina Simanek, MA, LMHP, MenDi McCuiston

Description: This panel explores how Resource Facilitators incorporate the Wise Mind technique to support individuals with brain injury in managing emotions, improving decision-making, and navigating daily challenges. Through real case examples and discussion, facilitators will demonstrate how blending emotional awareness with practical problem-solving leads to stronger outcomes for clients and families.

- Closing Keynote

## **Cultivating Optimism and Self Awareness**

Presenter: Juli Burney, M.A.

Description: This presentation provides a guide to our inner strengths so that we can thrive, whatever challenges we are presented with. Everyone has a sense of humor; we just don't use it to our potential. Good humor helps us remain cool under pressure and keep challenges in perspective. We may not always be in control of the events in our lives however we can always be in control of our responses. This is when a sense of humor is essential for cultivating optimism and true self-awareness. Come and discover your own delightfulness.