

# RTL

## Return to Learn for College and University Students



**BRAIN INJURY  
ASSOCIATION**  

---

**OF NEW YORK STATE**

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## **I. INTRODUCTORY INFORMATION**

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| <i>Introduction Letter</i>              | <b>1</b>   |
| <i>Return to Life Committee Members</i> | <b>2</b>   |
| <i>Concussion Information Sheet</i>     | <b>3-4</b> |

## **II. CREATING RTLU FOR YOUR COLLEGE OR UNIVERSITY**

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <i>Creating Return to Learn Guidelines</i>                               | <b>5</b>   |
| <i>Flow Chart</i>  | <b>6-7</b> |
| <i>RTLU Roles</i>  | <b>8</b>   |
| <i>Universal Academic Accommodations</i>                                 | <b>9</b>   |
| <i>Guidelines for Concussions that Occur Close to High-Stakes Events</i> | <b>10</b>  |

## **III. APPENDICES**

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <i>Email from Health Services to Office of Accommodations</i>     | <b>A1</b> |
| <i>Email from Office of Accommodations to Student</i>             | <b>A2</b> |
| <i>Email from Office of Accommodations to Instructors</i>         | <b>A3</b> |
| <i>Email Version of Concussion Information Sheet for Students</i> | <b>A4</b> |
| <i>Print Version of Concussion Information Sheet for Students</i> | <b>A5</b> |

Welcome to the Brain Injury Association of New York's RTLU (Return to Learn) handbook, a resource designed to support students at the college and university level in their academic journey after they sustain a concussion. This handbook was collectively crafted by our Concussion Initiative's Return to Life Committee, drawing upon insights from colleges and universities across the state of New York.

As you know, concussions can pose significant challenges to students, affecting their ability to fully engage in their studies. This RTLU Handbook will help your institution create guidelines to help students return to academic activities following a concussion.

The project's primary focus was on assisting students who aren't intercollegiate athletes, recognizing their potential lack of resources and guidance following a concussion. Emphasis was placed on the urgent need to provide accommodations promptly after a concussion occurs. Delays of 5-10 days, common in some cases, could significantly jeopardize a student's semester progress and disrupt their path to graduation.

We urge you to acquaint yourself with the handbook's contents and disseminate it among your colleagues. Through collective effort, we can guarantee that students recovering from concussions receive the necessary support and accommodations to excel academically. By nurturing an atmosphere of empathy and assistance, we can cultivate an environment where concussed students feel empowered to seek assistance and advocate for their needs.

Thank you for your dedication to the well-being and academic success of your students.

Sincerely,

**Brian Rieger, PhD**

Director, Integrated Care Program  
Department of Psychiatry, SUNY  
Upstate Medical University

**Michelle Kellen, M.Ed.**

Professional Development Manager  
Brain Injury Association  
of New York State

**Co-Chairs of BIANYS' Concussion Initiative Return to Life Committee**

*This handbook is supported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$250,000 with 100 percent funded by CDC/HHS. The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by, CDC/HHS, or the U.S. Government.*

## Return to Life Committee

**Susan Berstein, Esq.**

Special Counsel  
Schulte Roth & Zabel LLP

**Zachary Bevilacqua, PhD, ATC**

Assistant Professor of Athletic Training  
SUNY Brockport

**Aimee Brunelle, MS, ATC**

Former President  
New York State Athletic Trainers'  
Association

**Carol Bumbolow, MSN, BA, RN, NCSN**

Past President  
NYS Association of School Nurses

**Matt Erby, MD**

Attending Physician  
Sunnyview Rehabilitation

**Christina Finn, Ed.D, OTR/L**

Associate Professor, Occupational Therapy  
School of Health Professions  
New York Institute of Technology

**Matt Hickling, MSN, CPNP-PC**

Medical Director  
Lansingburgh Central School District

**Jacob McPherson, DPT, PhD**

Clinical Assistant Professor  
University at Buffalo

**Kim Nemi, OTR/L, CBIS**

Therapy Team Leader  
Upstate Concussion Center

**Audrey Paslow, PT, DPT, NCS**

Physical Therapist  
Anchor Physical Therapy, PLLC

**Mara Sproul, MPA, RN, CRRN, RN-BC**

Program Manager  
NYU Langone Health's Concussion Center

We extend our sincere thanks to Molly Mendolia MS, OTR/L and Evelyn Lester, PhD from the Colgate University Student Disability Services Team for their invaluable support and guidance in creating this handbook, particularly by sharing information regarding Colgate University's concussion management process. We are also grateful to Ellen Larson MD, FAAFP, Director of Student Health Services at Colgate University, for sharing her expertise on healthcare coordination within the university.

Additionally, we appreciate the participation of college representatives from across New York State who attended roundtables on this subject. Their insights and feedback were crucial in developing this handbook.

# CONCUSSION INFORMATION SHEET FOR COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY STAFF AND INSTRUCTORS



## CONCUSSION MYTHS

- You have to be hit in the head or knocked unconscious to have a concussion
- Most concussions occur in sports
- Everyone recovers from a concussion in two weeks
- A person should stay in a dark room and not do anything until they are symptom free
- If you sustain a concussion you should not use a device with a screen until you are symptom free

## CONCUSSION FACTS

- A concussion is a type of traumatic brain injury (TBI)
  - It is labeled mild TBI or mTBI
- You don't have to receive a direct blow to your head to suffer a concussion
  - Loss of consciousness is reported in less than 10% of concussions
- Recovery timelines can vary widely between individuals, and there is no one-size-fits-all typical timeline for recovery
- After a brief period (24-48 hours) of relative rest, a person should resume daily activities of living while monitoring symptom intensity
- Research has shown that restricting screen usage for the first 48 hours aids in recovery
  - After that brief period, restricting screen usage has no impact on recovery
- The mechanism for sustaining a concussion varies
  - A person can be concussed through a whiplash incident that does not involve an impact to the head
  - Falls are the most common cause of concussions
- Prior conditions such as migraines and previous concussions can impact a student's recovery

## COMMON SYMPTOMS

### Somatic

Headache  
Nausea  
Vomiting  
Balance issues  
Sensitivity to light/noise

### Neurobehavioral

Drowsiness  
Fatigue/lethargy  
Sadness/depression  
Nervousness/irritability  
Sleeping more than usual  
Trouble falling asleep

### Cognitive

Feeling "slowed down"  
Brain "fog"  
Difficulty concentration  
Trouble with learning and memory  
Easily confused and losing track of time and place

# Symptom manifestation in college academics

A student's symptoms can cause difficulties in their academics

For example, the student might ...

- get tired in class and over the course of the day
- be bothered by lights, noises and other environmental stimuli
- have trouble multi-tasking, such as listening, viewing a PowerPoint and taking notes
- take longer and need more repetition to learn new material
- have a headache that worsens with tasks that involve concentration
- struggle following multiple steps required for labs and high level math
- not understand directions given verbally due to slower processing speeds

## Tips to help a student who sustained a concussion

1. Offer support and help reduce the student's stress. Stress and anxiety exacerbates symptoms and can prolong recovery
2. Talk to the student about not "powering through" their concussion. Encourage them to slow down, prioritize and allow their brain to recover
3. Be alert to when the student's attention drifts and use subtle visual and verbal cues to redirect their attention
4. Repeat instructions and/or ask the student to repeat them back to you to ensure they understood the expectations of the task

## All parties being PROACTIVE is essential

**-Students -Accommodation Office -Instructors -Health Services**

**Taking a wait-and-see approach could be detrimental to the student's academic career**

- Early intervention and accommodations will help
  - Minimize anxiety and stress with the student feeling they are falling behind
  - The student maintain their grades
  - Decrease the chance that the student has to withdraw from a class or from the school

**If one of your students sustains a concussion,  
your college/university's office of accommodations  
will be contacting you with accommodations  
and other information**

# CREATING RETURN TO LEARN GUIDELINES

## Steps and Considerations for Creating RTLU Guidelines

### Identify Stakeholders

- Students
- Campus/Student Health Services Office
- Office responsible for accommodations
- Student life office/Resident Assistants
- Appropriate academic leadership
- Academic Advisor or Dean
- Sports Medicine/Athletic Trainers (for athletes)
- Parents

### Identify Points of Entry

How is the school made aware of a concussion

- Self report from the student
- Campus/Student Health Services Office
- Direct contact from a non-campus healthcare provider submitting documentation to office responsible for accommodations
- Student life office/Resident Assistants
- Sports Medicine/Athletic Trainers (for athletes)
- Parents

### Define Care Plan

What happens after the concussion is reported

- Identify the person who will be the academic point person
- Develop universal adjustments
- Define what medical documentation is required
- Identify the policies that relate to student privacy and how they apply to RTLU
- Identify the policies of your school that govern accommodations

### Design Communications Plan

From point of entry to office responsible for accommodations

- How is the office responsible for accommodations notified?
- What information is included in this notification?
  - Consistent and coordinated communication is important
- How does communication continue during the RTLU process?
  - Faculty and Staff notification

### Exit Plan/ Formalized Plan

- How and when is a student released from accommodations?
- If symptoms continue what is needed to institute a formal plan?
- If symptoms persist and significantly impact the student's academic ability what are options?
  - Incompletes
  - Withdrawal from some classes
  - Medical withdrawal

## **RTLU Flow Chart Information**

This flow chart shows a process of RTLU that a school can adapt to their administrative structure and resources within their institution.

Important points for the flow chart

### **Point person**

A person from the office that manages accommodations should be designated to manage the student's RTLU process.

### **Don't wait!**

Temporary accommodations should be implemented as soon as possible to help the student during their recovery. Taking a wait-and-see approach could be detrimental to the student's academic standing.

### **Disclaimers**

Colleges and universities should be cognizant of the laws and rules that govern student privacy.

### **Follow up**

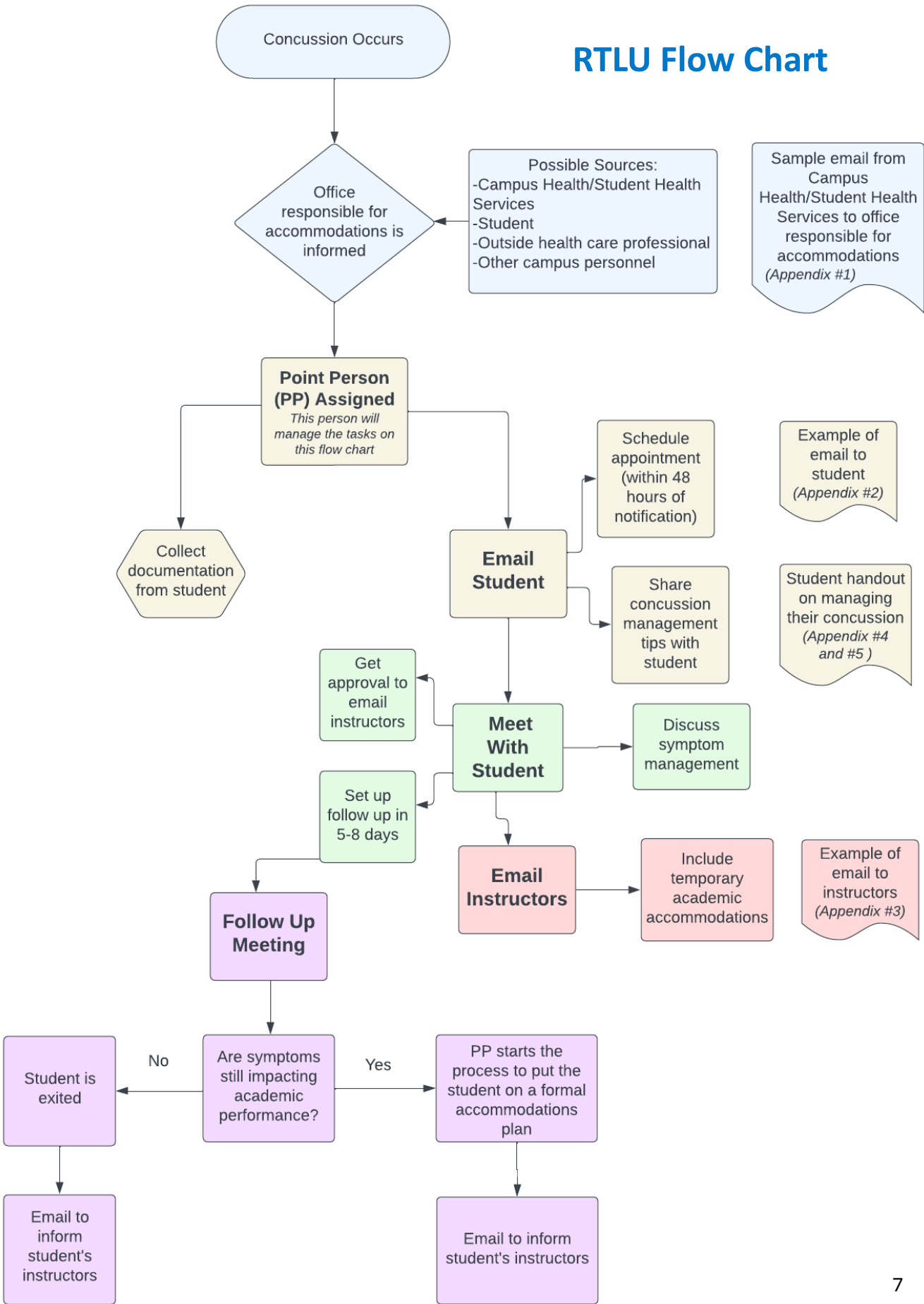
A follow up meeting with the student is important to evaluate their recovery and decide if a formal accommodation plan is needed.

This should include:

- a. Information from the student's health care provider
- b. Feedback from the student on their symptoms and academic progress
- c. Any other pertinent information



# RTLU Flow Chart



## Roles and Responsibilities for RTLU Stakeholders

| Team Member  | Responsibilities   |
|--|--|
| Student  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Clearly and honestly communicates their symptoms, academic difficulties and feelings</li> <li>● Attends follow up appointments with healthcare provider</li> <li>● Attends appointments with their designated point person from their school's office of disability/accommodations</li> <li>● Advocates for self during recovery</li> </ul> |
| Campus Health/Student Health Services                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Evaluates, diagnoses and manages the student's injury</li> <li>● Provides documentation to student and office of accommodations (if approved by the student) about progress and medical/academic recommendations</li> </ul>   |
| Designated point person from the office responsible for accommodations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Serves as the student's guide/advocate in their return to academics</li> <li>● Communicates needed accommodations with student's instructors</li> <li>● Collects necessary documentation from the student and/or healthcare provider</li> <li>● Assesses if a formal accommodation plan is needed</li> </ul>                                |
| Office responsible for accommodations                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Directs and oversees the RTLU management plan</li> <li>● Helps create a change in the culture of the school regarding the implementation of concussion programs and policies</li> <li>● Provides instructors with support and information to deliver academic accommodations</li> </ul>   |
| Instructors  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Help the student get the best education possible given the circumstances</li> <li>● Follow the recommended academic accommodations</li> <li>● Communicate with the student's designated point person from the school's office of disability/accommodations as needed or requested</li> </ul>  |
| Student advisor  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Advocates for the student</li> <li>● Facilitates conversation with the student and other stakeholders as needed</li> <li>● Helps connect student with appropriate campus resources such as health services and the office that manages accommodations</li> </ul>  |

# UNIVERSAL ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

This is a menu of accommodations that can be utilized following a concussion

- Not all the accommodations will be used
- Accommodations should be individualized and monitored for effectiveness
- Informal accommodations should be implemented immediately following the diagnosis of a concussion



## ENVIRONMENTAL

- Reduce fluorescent lighting
- Minimize exposure to loud noises
- Allow student to choose a preferred seat to minimize distractions
- Use campus ride assist program, especially if the campus is large or hilly



## CLASS

- Video or audio record lectures
- Provide outline of lecture notes
- Allow student to use computer to take notes
- Allow student to take breaks as needed
- Encourage utilization of peer support through sharing notes and study groups



## HIGH-STAKES ASSESSMENTS

- Allow extra time
- Reduce length of assessment
- Allow student to use math/science charts
- Use open ended questions
- Allow student to audio or video record their answers
- Postpone assignments and tests as needed
- Allow student to type answers, especially with essays



## RESEARCH AND LABS

- Provide written and Oral directions
- Assess understanding of directions by having student summarize or repeat back the steps
- Allow extra time to complete labs and lab reports
- Allow student to type answers



## GENERAL

- Schedule frequent cognitive rest breaks
- Identify sources of stress to minimize anxiety and identify methods to handle stressors
- Utilize multiple modalities for communication
- Encourage self symptom monitoring
- Use a blank sheet of paper to assist when reading

# Guide for Concussions that Occur Close to High-Stakes Events

*Considerations for the office that handles accommodations*

## For concussions occurring at mid-terms

**Temporarily postpone any tests, projects or papers that are due**

- This will reduce the student's stress, which exacerbates symptoms
- Inform instructor(s) that the assessment or assignment will be rescheduled based on input from the student's healthcare provider
- Inform instructor(s) that the student and your office will work together to reschedule

## For concussions occurring at the end of the semester

**Temporarily postpone all final exams, final projects and papers**

- Adhere to your college or university's guidelines for granting incompletes to students
- Communicate effectively with the student and their instructors
  - Explain the incomplete policy, including the timeline for completing missed work and exams
  - Share information regarding the student's follow-up appointments with their healthcare provider
- Formulate a contingency plan in case student's symptoms prevent them from completing the required work within the specified timeframe

## Tips to help the student with make-up tests and work

- Assist the student in identifying and prioritizing their make-up tests, projects, papers
  - Create a clear calendar outlining when tests will be taken and deadlines for completing projects and papers
- Collaborate with the student to create a structured plan for preparing for make-up tests
- Help the student create a timeline for any major projects or papers, detailing the necessary steps to complete each assignment
- Schedule weekly check-ins to monitor progress and offer assistance as needed

# EMAIL EXAMPLES AND HANDOUTS

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <i>Email from Health Services to<br/>Office of Accommodations</i>     | <b>A1</b> |
| <i>Email from Office of<br/>Accommodations to Student</i>             | <b>A2</b> |
| <i>Email from Office of<br/>Accommodations to Instructors</i>         | <b>A3</b> |
| <i>Email Version of Concussion<br/>Information Sheet for Students</i> | <b>A4</b> |
| <i>Print Version of Concussion<br/>Information Sheet for Students</i> | <b>A5</b> |

## Letter to Accommodations Office/Point Person from Campus Health

**From:** Health Services (or other relevant department)

**To:** Office responsible for accommodations (or other relevant office)

I am writing to request academic accommodations for: Student's NAME

They have been diagnosed with a concussion. A concussion is a mild traumatic brain injury that can lead to immediate or subsequent symptoms, potentially impacting their role as a student. Symptoms they may experience include but are not limited to:

| Physical                     | Cognitive                                       | Other                                    |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| Bothered by light or noise   | Difficulty concentrating                        | Sleep disturbances                       |
| Balance problems             | Brain "fog"                                     | Irritability                             |
| Feeling tired/<br>no energy  | Problems with short-term<br>or long-term memory | Feeling more emotional                   |
| Headaches,<br>blurred vision | Trouble thinking clearly                        | Lack of interest in normal<br>activities |

I am recommending the following temporary accommodations:

|   |  |   |  |
|---|--|---|--|
| Extra time for assessments and assignments                |  | Provide written and oral instructions                                       |  |
| Cognitive breaks during class                             |  | Audio or video recording of lectures  |  |
| Not attending class until: _____                          |  | Provide the student with an outline of notes or a study guide ahead of time |  |
| Alternating attending class between morning and afternoon |  | Use of audio versions of texts or any required reading                      |  |
| No assessments (test or quizzes) until: _____             |  | Allow student to clarify and explain responses on any work                  |  |

Please set up an appointment with the student as soon as possible or within the next 24-48 hours to discuss temporary accommodations and communicating with their instructors. The student has a follow up appointment with health services on (Date) in which we will evaluate their recovery and symptom level.

If symptoms continue to impact their academic performance, we will reach out to you to discuss setting up a formal accommodation plan.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

ADD any legal disclaimer...

A1

## Letter to Student from Accommodations Office/Point Person

Dear [Student's Name],

I hope this message finds you well, despite the recent concussion you sustained on [Date].

Concussions are serious traumatic brain injuries that can potentially impact your academic performance. It is crucial that temporary accommodations are implemented to support your recovery and minimize any disruptions to your studies.

Recovery from a concussion varies from person to person, making it difficult to predict its duration. Therefore, it's important to take proactive steps to assist you during this period. I kindly request that you schedule a meeting with me within the next 48-72 hours to discuss and establish a personalized accommodation plan tailored to your needs.

### **Option 1: (This is the recommended option)**

A meeting has been arranged on: [Date] at [Time] in my office, located at [Building Name, Room Number].

### **Option 2:**

Please let me know a time that is good for you in the next 48-72 hours to schedule a meeting. This discussion will focus on developing a temporary accommodation plan and identifying strategies to manage your academic workload effectively during your recovery.

Attached is a document that outlines tips to support you during the early stages of your recovery. Please take the time to review it carefully.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns. I am here to assist you throughout this process.

Best regards,

[Your Name]

[Your Office Information]

## Letter to Student's instructors, dean, etc. from Accommodations Office/Point Person

Dear (Instructor's name),

I am writing to inform you that (Student's name) sustained an injury that may impact their academic abilities.

Here is a list of academic accommodations to be utilized to help the student during their initial stage of recovery:

- Extra time for assignments, tests, quizzes
- Breaks during class due to mental fatigue
- Not attending class for \_\_\_ days or until \_\_\_\_\_
- No assessments (test, quizzes) until \_\_\_\_\_
- Provide written and oral instructions for projects and assignments ahead of time
- Audio or video recording of lectures so student can listen or view later
- Reduction of the number of problems, questions to show master of skills
- Use of audio versions of texts or any required reading
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

The office of accommodations will meet with the student on (date of follow up) at which time continuation of the current supports will be determined.

Please reach out to me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Name

Office information



## **EMAIL VERSION**

*This document is the email version  
to be sent to a student upon  
diagnosis of a concussion*

*The font is larger and more spread  
out to make it easier for the student  
to read and process*

# Concussion Information Sheet for Students

## What to Do First 48 Hours

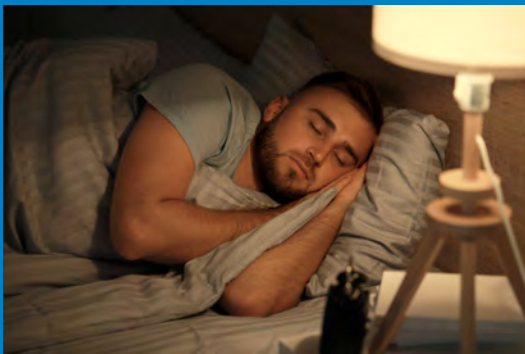
Take a light walk.



Sleep is important.

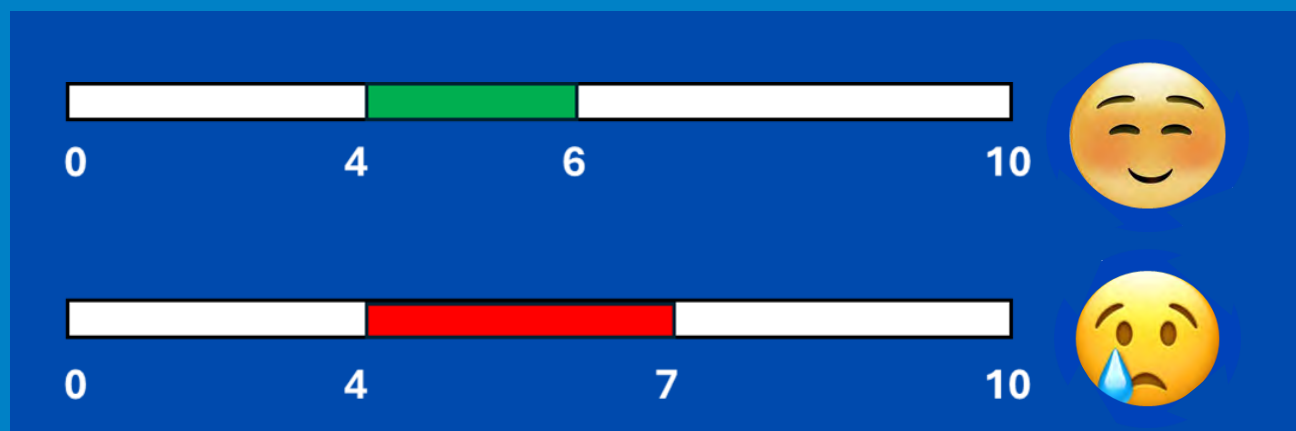
Go to sleep and wake up at  
consistent times.

Your brain needs rest.



Monitor your symptoms.

Stop and rest if an activity increases your total  
symptoms more than 2 points on a 0-10 scale.



# What to do First 48 Hours

Limit smartphone,  
computer and TV use.



Spend time with  
friends in calm  
environments.

Continue to do your daily routine.



## **“POWERING THROUGH” YOUR SYMPTOMS**

### **What to Avoid**

Being completely inactive

Physical activity that is not prescribed by your  
healthcare provider

Drinking alcohol or using mind altering substances

### **Return to Academic Work**

Symptoms can be aggravated by academic work, even  
routine tasks like reading, writing, or taking notes.

You will have a limited amount of “brain energy” to use  
each day; spend it on schoolwork and classes that are  
important.

# Return to Academic Work

Studies have shown that returning to class and coursework, using your symptoms as your guide, helps with recovery.

## These academic accommodations will help as you recover

- Postponed exams, assignments, and quizzes
- Excused absences or breaks from lecture/lab
- Audio recorded lectures
- Notetaker
- Extra time to complete exams or assignments

Your School's Accessibility Office will contact you.

Set up an appointment to discuss accommodations.

Be proactive. Don't wait to see if you recover quickly.

# CONCUSSION INFORMATION SHEET FOR STUDENTS

## **HANDOUT VERSION**

*This document is a handout version that can be printed and given to a student who sustains a concussion*

# STUDENT INFORMATION SHEET

## What to do the first 48 hours following a concussion

### CONTINUE “ACTIVITIES OF DAILY LIVING”

- Such as:
- Going for a light walk
  - Preparing meals
  - Doing laundry
  - Cleaning living area



### SLEEP IS IMPORTANT

- Your brain needs sleep
- Go to sleep and wake up at consistent times
- Excessive daytime napping may disrupt sleep/wake cycles

## MONITOR THE INTENSITY OF YOUR SYMPTOMS

- Stop and rest if an activity increases your total symptoms more than 2 points on an 0-10 scale
- Example: You start reading for class and your pain level is 3. After 30 minutes it increases to a 6

### Returning to Academics

Symptoms can be aggravated by academic work

This includes easy tasks such as reading, writing or taking notes

- You will have a limited amount of “brain energy” to use each day
- Spend it on classwork that is most important
- You may also need to decide which classes are most important to attend, instead of trying to attend all of your classes

Studies have shown that returning to class and course work, using your symptoms your guide, helps with recovery



## What to Do

- Limit smartphone, computer and TV use
- Spend time with friends in calm environments
- Continue to do your daily activities and chores
- Avoid noisy and crowded environments
- Go to the dining hall during less busy periods and wear noise-canceling headphones



## What to Avoid

- **POWERING THROUGH YOUR SYMPTOMS**
- Being completely inactive
- Drinking alcohol or using other mind-altering substances
- Driving until discussed with your healthcare provider
- Physical activity that is not approved by a healthcare provider, including:
  - Club, intramural or intercollegiate sports
  - Weightlifting
  - Strenuous cardiovascular exercise



**Your accessibility office on campus will be contacting you. It is best to be proactive and get accommodations in place instead of waiting to see if you recover quickly.**