

# MANAGING FATIGUE AFTER BRAIN INJURY

April Moser, B.S., CBIS, CESP, and Julie Schlauch, M.A., LPC, CBIS, CESP  
Community Skills Program®

## What Is Fatigue?

Noun (fa-tigue | \ fə-ˈtēg)

Simply put, fatigue is a feeling of tiredness, weariness, or exhaustion. According to the Mayo Clinic, “Nearly everyone is overtired or overworked from time to time. Such instances of temporary fatigue usually have an identifiable cause and a likely remedy.

“Unrelenting exhaustion, on the other hand, lasts longer, is more profound and isn’t relieved by rest. It’s a nearly constant state of weariness that develops over time and reduces your energy, motivation and concentration. Fatigue at this level impacts your emotional and psychological well-being, too.”<sup>1</sup>

Fatigue is commonly seen following brain injury, immediately and/or at various stages post-injury.

## Types of Fatigue

**Physical Fatigue:** Can occur after engaging in vigorous physical activity, such as sports, gardening, or exercise. However, physical fatigue can also occur as a symptom of various illnesses, such as heart disease, diabetes, and chronic infection; and injuries, such as a traumatic brain injury (TBI).<sup>2</sup>

**Psychological Fatigue:** Occurs when dealing with events in life that cause intense emotional reactions. The emotions may be a result of dealing with a divorce, the loss of a job, or the loss of a loved one. “The feelings of fear, dread, confusion, grief or anger can be so overwhelming that the body remains in a constantly distressed state.”<sup>2</sup>

**Cognitive Fatigue:** Occurs when the brain is used for a prolonged period of time—for example, when writing a paper for school, reading a book, or figuring out a schedule. Cognitive fatigue frequently occurs after brain injury.<sup>3</sup>

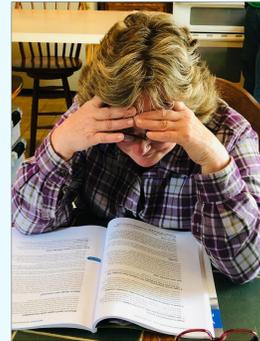
## How Common Is Cognitive Fatigue after Brain Injury?



About 70% of TBI survivors report symptoms of cognitive fatigue.<sup>4</sup>

## Ways to Manage Fatigue

### Stop Fatigue Before It Begins



Learn what triggers your fatigue and identify the early signs of it—for example, becoming irritable or distracted during an activity. Take a break, or stop the activity, if necessary, when you recognize the early signs of fatigue occurring.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to determining what triggers your fatigue, learn what factors make the symptoms worse, such as long conversations, noisy sporting events, fluorescent lighting in stores, or multitasking.

Note how long you can perform certain activities before fatigue begins. For example, if fatigue occurs after 30 minutes of reading, only read for 20 minutes, and then plan to gradually increase the amount of time by small increments.<sup>5</sup>

### Get Adequate Rest/Sleep

Set a regular schedule of going to bed and waking up at the same time every day. Balance daily routines with quiet times, rests, or restful activity, as needed.<sup>4</sup> A short nap may be indicated, but be careful not to nap so long that it is difficult for you to sleep through the night.

### Manage Time Effectively

- Plan and follow a daily schedule. Use a calendar, a planner, or a smartphone application to map out each day; be sure to include brief rest times or a nap, if necessary.
- Prioritize activities.
- Pace activities in order to conserve energy and increase efficiency overall.
- Do the tasks that require the most physical and/or cognitive effort earlier in the day.
- Avoid overscheduling.



### Exercise Daily

Exercise results in increased blood flow to the brain, which helps to improve physical and cognitive performance.<sup>6</sup> Exercise can also build stamina and endurance, decrease depression, and improve sleep overall.<sup>4</sup>

### Maintain a Proper Diet

Eat small snacks between moderate-sized meals. When you eat large quantities of food at once, your brain signals your body to slow down and focus on digestion, which contributes to fatigue. In addition, your blood sugar can go through spikes and crashes if your body rapidly transitions from “full” to “empty.” Finish off every meal with a glass of water; dehydration causes fatigue.<sup>7</sup>

Avoid alcohol. Alcohol consumption may cause a decrease in energy, mood, and level of physical, mental, and cognitive performance.



### De-stress

Reduce or eliminate stressful situations in your life whenever possible. Stress-induced emotions take up a lot of energy, which leads to fatigue.<sup>4</sup> Meditation, yoga, and deep-breathing techniques are beneficial in reducing fatigue by lowering blood pressure, balancing the nervous system, and producing better sleep quality.<sup>8</sup>



## Other Helpful Tips

- Listen to music:** Music stimulates the brain and increases alertness.<sup>7</sup> Listen to an upbeat song while doing routine activities that can sap your energy, such as housework.
- Go outside:** Exposure to sunlight increases the brain’s serotonin levels, which helps elevate mood and energy.<sup>7</sup> Go for a walk or eat lunch outside.
- Laugh:** Laughing boosts heart rate and stimulates muscles, which immediately reduces feelings of fatigue.<sup>7</sup> Watch a comedy or talk to a friend who always makes you laugh.
- Utilize your sense of smell:** Scents such as peppermint, lavender, rosemary, lemon, and orange can enhance mental focus, clarity, and memory.<sup>7</sup> Eat a fresh orange or use a diffuser with essential oils.
- Clean and organize:** Having a disorganized living space can contribute to fatigue.<sup>7</sup> Organizing paperwork and bills and donating unwanted items will help to clear your mind and make you feel more productive.
- Use technology:** Today’s technology, such as Fitbit devices and smartphone applications, can help manage and track physical and sleep habits. Be aware, however, that the use of electronic devices before bed can lead to difficulty falling asleep and disrupted sleep.
- Talk to your doctor:** Prescription and nonprescription sleep aids, such as melatonin supplements, may be beneficial.

## References

- <sup>1</sup>Fatigue. (2018, January 11). Retrieved April 29, 2019, from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/symptoms/fatigue/basics/definition/SYM-0050894>
- <sup>2</sup>Three types of fatigue and how to heal it naturally. (2016, April 02). Retrieved April 30, 2019, from <https://positivemed.com/2016/03/31/types-of-fatigue/>
- <sup>3</sup>Scott, E. (2019, February 14). Struggling to get stuff done? You might be struggling with cognitive fatigue. Retrieved April 30, 2019, from <https://metro.co.uk/2019/02/09/feeling-irritated-stressed-finding-hard-get-stuff-done-might-cognitive-fatigue-8469750/>
- <sup>4</sup>Fatigue and traumatic brain injury. (n.d.). Retrieved April 29, 2019, from <https://mskcc.org/tbi/factsheets/fatigue-and-traumatic-brain-injury>
- <sup>5</sup>Reconnecting lives. (n.d.). Retrieved April 30, 2019, from <https://synapse.org.au/information-services/managing-fatigue-after-a-brain-injury.aspx>
- <sup>6</sup>2017 Annual Conference - Presentations. (n.d.). Retrieved April 29, 2019, from [https://www.braininjurymn.org/annual\\_conference/CONF-2017-presentations.php](https://www.braininjurymn.org/annual_conference/CONF-2017-presentations.php)
- <sup>7</sup>Miller, C. (2019, January 31). Top 10 ways to reduce fatigue. Retrieved April 29, 2019, from <https://healthfully.com/331263-top-10-ways-to-reduce-fatigue.html>
- <sup>8</sup>Meditation benefits for those with chronic fatigue and fibromyalgia. (n.d.). Retrieved April 29, 2019, from [https://www.naturalnews.com/024813\\_meditation\\_stress\\_benefits.html](https://www.naturalnews.com/024813_meditation_stress_benefits.html)