

Brain Injury Recovery – Fatigue

As many as 98% of people who experience a traumatic brain injury report some kind of fatigue; 70% complain of *mental fatigue*. Just what is this fatigue like? It is a huge feeling of exhaustion or weariness. It can affect one's ability to do both physical and mental work. It can sap energy so much that it can prevent a person from taking care of themselves or going back to work. Some people find that they can't do the things they used to enjoy doing.

Physical Fatigue can come from muscle weakness. It can come from having to work harder to do things that were easy before the brain injury. That includes things like dressing, working around the house, even walking. Physical fatigue gets worse in the evening, after a busy day. But the next morning, after a good night's sleep, it should be less. Often this kind of fatigue gets better with regular, graded exercise and with time.

Psychological Fatigue is the fatigue that comes with depression or other psychological conditions. This kind of fatigue gets worse with stress. Often, sleep does not help at all. Psychological fatigue is often worse when you wake up in the morning. To "cure" psychological fatigue you must find its cause. Your doctor, a psychologist, or counselor can help.

Mental Fatigue or Cognitive Fatigue is a special kind of fatigue that can happen after a brain injury. Somebody with mental fatigue might say, "After a while, I just can't concentrate any more. I just can't think." It is possible that this happens because the brain injury forces you to concentrate harder to do tasks that were easier before the injury. Just like hard physical work tires you out, so does hard mental work. Unfortunately, mental or cognitive fatigue is the kind of fatigue that we know the least about, even though it causes problems for so many people with brain injury. Often this kind of fatigue gets better with regular, graded activity, and with time.

What Can You Do?

If you think your fatigue may be coming from depression, anxiety, or other psychological conditions, see your doctor.

If you think your fatigue is physical or mental, try some of these things:

1. Get enough sleep and rest. If you are having difficulty sleeping: develop a good *sleep routine*. Do you have insomnia or sleep apnea? Sometimes, these are side-effects of your brain injury. If either of these problems is affecting how well you sleep, tell your doctor. There may be treatments.
2. Try to change your schedule. Do the things that require the most physical or mental “strength” earlier when you are fresher. Don’t save the grocery shopping for evening. Don’t try to balance the checkbook or figure out your income taxes in the evening when you are tired.
3. Allow time for rests during the day. After one of these rests, you may be fresh again and able to take on some of those more difficult tasks.
4. Start exercising. You may need to check first with your physical or occupational therapist or doctor to find out which is the best and safest type of exercise program for you. Begin with just a little, and gradually increase. Hopefully, the exercise will improve your physical endurance and mental alertness. Research has shown that people with brain injury who exercise have fewer symptoms and better cognitive function. They feel their health is better, and say that they are less depressed. They may be more mobile and more productive.
5. Eat a good, nutritious diet. A low-fat, low sugar, high-fiber diet is strongly encouraged. Contact your doctor for the best diet for your situation.
6. Limit your caffeine intake to 1 – 2 servings per day, and avoid this 4 hours before you go to sleep. Too much caffeine can affect your ability to get a restful sleep.
7. Avoid alcohol or other substances that affect your mental alertness, energy level, or your sleep cycle.
8. Keep yourself mentally stimulated. At the same time that you avoid getting overtired, also avoid being under-stimulated. It’s a fine line.