

# Fatigue after Brain Injury

## What is fatigue?

Fatigue is one of the most prevalent and common difficulties reported by people after a brain injury. It can be misunderstood as tiredness, something everyone has experienced after a busy day or prolonged exercise. But fatigue is experienced on a much deeper level and in this video, I'd like to help you to understand it.

My name is Lawrence and in 2019, I was involved in a car accident which resulted in a traumatic brain injury. The fatigue I experienced afterwards had a significant impact on my daily life.

As part of my rehabilitation, I learnt about fatigue and how it affected me. This helped me to put in place strategies to manage it, many of which I still use today.

Identifying the three different types of fatigue is an important first step...

The first being physical. Physical fatigue occurs after physical exertion like walking the dog or mowing the lawn. You may experience symptoms such as headaches as well as heavy and aching limbs.

Cognitive. Cognitive fatigue occurs after using your brain for a task such as being involved in a meeting at work or following a storyline in a TV programme. It may not be something you have experienced before but it is common after a brain injury. You may find it difficult to think, concentrate, rely on your memory or problem solve.

And the third emotional. Emotional fatigue can include feeling low, irritable, unmotivated, and emotionally drained. It can feel unrelenting, and rest often has no impact.

Here are some more examples of what fatigue felt like for others affected by brain injury.

I had terrible, terrible headaches. In fact it kind of really made me unable to function. I couldn't do very much in the house, I couldn't take the dogs for walks, I couldn't even make a cup of tea because I just felt this overwhelming tiredness.

I felt like I was just being lazy, and I felt guilty on my partner. It was overwhelming sometimes and it would worsen when I tried to push through. I kept thinking I could just push through and push through but it just made things ten times harder and worse emotionally for us.

I just felt very tearful, quite low in mood and just feeling a kind of helplessness

It is important to recognise the difference between the types of fatigue you experience and the impact they have so that they can be managed effectively.

## How long will my fatigue last?

It is not always clear how long fatigue will continue following a brain injury, and whilst a period of three months may be given as a rough estimation, in many cases it can prevail for longer.

Fatigue can make your return to the roles and responsibilities that are important to you more challenging. Managing my own fatigue was vital to ensure continued recovery from my brain injury.

## How can I improve my symptoms?

There are several ways to help manage your fatigue. This may take some practise but will get easier over time.

**The first being pacing.** Regular short breaks **before** you are noticeably fatigued will help conserve your energy. For example, take yourself away from your computer screen at work after 20 minutes and find a quiet place to rest. Ensure you do this throughout the day to manage symptoms such as headaches.

**Planning and prioritising.** Plan demanding tasks when you have more energy and do simpler things when you are more fatigued. Try and space out activities and plan rests in between. For example, you may have more energy in the mornings so consider doing tasks like cleaning or taking the dog on a walk then. Also, consider delaying, delegating or dumping tasks altogether where possible.

**Chunking.** Breaking tasks into smaller, manageable chunks and being time-orientated rather than task-orientated will help. For example, set a timer for 15 minutes whilst you're gardening and stop to rest for 10 minutes before continuing. Resist the urge to push through even though you feel able to carry on. This will enable you to have some energy at the end of the task rather than completely wiping out at the end.

**Permission.** Making time to 'look after yourself' and investing in self-care is an important part of fatigue management. Eating well, drinking plenty of fluids, getting enough sleep and regular low grade exercises are things you should consider. Don't be afraid to ask for help if you have someone that can relieve you of the task.

**Avoid** busy environments. Even small family gatherings can be exhausting due to multiple conversations happening at once as well as being able to tolerate background noises. If you find yourself in this situation, try and find a quiet space.

**Avoid** driving - particularly unfamiliar routes or long distances.

**Avoid** having to focus on complex or large quantities of information at once.

## **What can we offer?**

Here at the Northumberland Head Injuries Service, we offer education sessions on fatigue and guidance on managing a range of symptoms. We can work with you to identify your signs and symptoms and develop a personalised fatigue management plan incorporating what's important to you. You may be asked to complete a fatigue diary

For more information, please get in touch with our service using the contact details found on our website.

[www.cntw.nhs.uk/nhis](http://www.cntw.nhs.uk/nhis)

Telephone: 01670 394 150

Thank you to Lawrence and our service users who took part in the creation of this video.