

Mental Fatigue and What You Can Do About it

For patients with mental fatigue

Read this resource to learn:

- What is mental fatigue
- What is a restorative experience
- What else can I do to improve mental fatigue



What is mental fatigue?

During or after your medical treatment, you may sometimes feel mentally tired. This is called mental fatigue. Mental fatigue can come and go. Mental fatigue will make it hard to pay attention or focus on a task for long periods of time.

You may feel mental fatigue after doing work that takes a lot of mental energy. You may feel mental fatigue if you feel a lot of stress for a long period of time.

Often when you feel physical fatigue, your mind will feel fatigued as well.

During diagnosis, treatment, and even after treatment you may feel stress from:

- your diagnosis (finding out your illness or condition)
- the decisions you need to make
- your treatments
- needing to make plans and solve problems

It is possible that you will find it hard to:

- pay attention to information
- understand new information
- make decisions and plans
- solve problems
- focus your thoughts
- remember things

There are certain activities that may help to reduce mental fatigue. These are called restorative experiences.

What is a restorative experience?

A restorative experience is an activity that helps rest your mind and bring back your mental energy. A restorative experience often involves spending time in nature. For example, you could:

- Walk or sit outdoors (backyard, garden, park).
- Look at nature (trees, clouds, sunset).
- Do some gardening.
- Sit by water (ponds, streams, lakes, fountains).
- Watch wildlife (birds or other animals).
- Listen to birds or other sounds of nature like a stream or river.

It is helpful that you do something that:

- interests you (so you can start the activity without much work)
- is a change from daily routines and concerns (but not watching TV or using a computer because watching TV or using a computer tends to deplete mental energy)
- is not boring to you
- is fun for you (for example, gardening may be fun and restorative to one person but not to another person)

Try doing restorative activities for:

- 20 to 30 minutes each day
- 3 days a week

Restorative activities can:

- give you a chance to relax
- let you be away from everyday life
- help you forget worries
- help you reflect on personal matters.

Doing a restorative activity can also help you improve or maintain your attention.

What else can I do to improve mental fatigue?

Physical exercise

Do a physical exercise program that slowly increases in intensity (the amount of energy it takes to do). This can help with mental fatigue as well as physical fatigue in people with a different health conditions, including cancer.

Nutrition intake

What and when you eat can impact fatigue.

To help maintain mental energy:

- Have small meals or snack frequently.
- Get enough protein (including foods high in omega 3 fatty acids).
- Eat more fibre and whole grains.
- Balance your meals and ensure enough fruits and vegetables, and stay hydrated.

Take breaks

Take regular breaks and rests from hard activities. This will help you keep your mental and physical levels more stable.

Reduce stress

Reduce your stress to help manage your fatigue. Doing activities that reduce your stress can help increase your mental energy.

If your mental fatigue is caused by stress rather than doing hard mental tasks, here are some activities that can be helpful:

- Exploring and finding out new information about things of interest (by reading, stories, short trips)
- Doing activities for pure enjoyment such as:
 - Making things (arts and crafts).
 - Collecting things (special objects of interest, for example, spoons, thimbles, rocks, sea shells).

Reduce noise

Reduce noise. It is more tiring to think and focus on what you are doing with noisy distractions (for example, reading with the TV turned on).

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