



MENTAL FATIGUE BRAIN FATIGUE

WHAT IS MENTAL FATIGUE?

Mental fatigue is characterized by an unusual feeling of fatigue or malaise and is a drain on a person's mental energy upon mental activity. The result is a diminished attention and concentration capacity. Situations which involve high levels of external cues and an overload of impressions are strenuous. Failing energy levels and excessively long recovery times are the result of over-exertion. The condition impairs the person's ability to function in their work, studies and gatherings with family and friends.

WHEN DOES MENTAL FATIGUE OCCUR?

Mental fatigue can occur as a result of a direct blow to the head. It can also arise as a result of a stroke or other disorders of the nervous system. For most people, fatigue subsides after a period of time while, for others, this pathological fatigue persists for several months or years even after the brain injury or disease has healed.

CAUSES

The cause of this extreme fatigue is not known. However, there has been speculation that the symptom may be caused by the dysfunction of the astrocytes, the most common type of supporting cells in the brain. As a consequence, nerve cell communications do not function properly.

MENTAL FATIGUE SYMPTOMS ARE OFTEN PRESENT IN THE FOLLOWING SITUATIONS:

- ▶ Situations in which there is an invasion of the senses with an overload of impressions, and noisy and hectic environments such as crowded events, also the hustle and bustle of shopping centers, and travelling by bus, etc.;
- ▶ Reading books and newspapers;
- ▶ Conversations with people – this becomes more of a struggle when more people are involved
- ▶ Unexpected events

HOW TO RECOGNIZE MENTAL FATIGUE

Typical symptoms include:

- ▶ An unusually rapid drain on mental energy levels upon mental activity
- ▶ Following over-exertion, a long recovery time disproportionate to the exertion level
- ▶ Impaired attention and concentration over time
- ▶ Diurnal variation of the fatigue symptom with the fatigue often being better in the mornings and worse in the afternoons and evenings; variations from one day to the next;
- ▶ Usually one or several associated symptoms (see below).

The following additional or associated symptoms are common:

- ▶ Mood swings, irritability and stress intolerance
- ▶ Trouble with memory
- ▶ Sleeping problems
- ▶ Sensitivity to, or intolerance of light and loud noise
- ▶ Headaches following over-exertion

IF THE FATIGUE IS NOT ACKNOWLEDGED IN TIME, THIS MAY RESULT IN THE FOLLOWING:

- ▶ A total and almost paralyzing fatigue can occur
- ▶ Longer periods of rest may be needed, of ten over several days
- ▶ A worsening of symptoms over time

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

- ▶ Take regular breaks
- ▶ Encourage rest before becoming overtired
- ▶ Try to work at a steady pace, taking one task at a time with short working periods, and prioritize the tasks
- ▶ Plan the days' activities or the activities for the week in a diary or journal. Avoid over-exertion
- ▶ For further advice and tips, see the brochure, 'Strategies for managing with mental fatigue'.

HOW CAN YOU OBTAIN FURTHER INFORMATION?

Further information on brain fatigue can be found on the web-site, www.mf.gu.se. You will find a self-assessment scale to test the level of your mental fatigue. There is no established treatment for mental fatigue. Fortunately, there are steps that can be taken to help maintain consistent mental energy levels. Research is being carried out with promising results; it may be possible to use mindfulness meditation in combination with certain drugs.

This sheet was compiled in collaboration with the Department of Clinical Neuroscience (neurology) and with the Department of Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy at Sahlgrenska University Hospital, Gothenburg.

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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE BRAIN IS NOT ABLE TO MANAGE ANY MORE?

Information on mental/brain
fatigue