

Mental Fatigue and what you can do about it



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During your treatment for cancer, you may at some point have trouble thinking and concentrating. Mental Fatigue is any temporary trouble or problem that you might have with paying attention, focusing on a task, or concentrating. Mental fatigue often occurs after experiencing high levels of stress or emotional situations. You may also feel physically tired along with mental fatigue.

During diagnosis, treatment, and even after treatment you may be stressed by:

- your diagnosis
- the decisions you are required to make
- your treatments
- the need to make plans and solve problems

It is possible that you will find it difficult to:

- pay attention to and understand the information you are being given
- make decisions and plans
- solve problems
- focus your thoughts
- remember things

Research has found that there are certain activities that may help to reduce mental fatigue. These are called Restorative Experiences.

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What is a Restorative experience?

There are many different activities that may help to rest your mind and bring back your mental energy.

It has been suggested that going outdoors to experience nature on a nice day can be helpful. For example you could:

- Walk or sit outdoors (backyard, garden, park)
- Observe a natural view (trees, clouds, sunset)
- Get involved in Gardening (gardens, flowers, plants)
- Sit by water (ponds, streams, lakes, fountains)
- Watch wildlife, birds, animals
- Listen to birds or other sounds of nature such as rustling leaves

It is not so important **what** you do, but that you do something that:

- Catches your interest easily (so you can start the activity without much effort)
- Involves a change from daily routines and concerns (but not TV watching as it tends to take away mental energy)
- Is not boring to you
- Be enjoyable or, at least pleasing, for you (different things have different meanings to individuals e.g., gardening may be one person might think gardening is a chore, but another might think it's a something fun to do.

Research suggests that it is most helpful to undertake these activities for at least 20-30 minutes per day 3 days per week giving your mind time to relax and clear out unfinished thoughts and make sense of events. This can be helpful in restoring or maintaining attention as well.

Much of the research supporting this has been done with women early in a breast cancer diagnosis. It is thought that some of these ideas could be helpful at other stages of disease as well as in other types of cancers and diseases.

Other things to try to improve mental fatigue:

Physical Exercise

A physical exercise program that slowly increases in difficulty (see Exercise Booklet from Health Canada) has been shown to help with mental fatigue as well as physical fatigue in people with cancer and also people with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome.



Rest periods/Stress Reduction

It has been shown that regular rest periods are a good way to maintain performance and manage fatigue”. Although this data comes from workplace literature, there is no reason to think that this approach would not be helpful for cancer-related fatigue especially if going outdoors on a nice day is incorporated into the rest period.

Stress can contribute to fatigue so engaging in activities that reduce your stress can contribute to increased mental energy (See *Stress and Your Health* pamphlet).

If the mental fatigue that you are experiencing seems more tied to stress rather than periods of challenging mental tasks, the following activities could also prove helpful:

- Exploring and finding out new information about things of interest (through reading, stories, excursions). Activities done for the pure enjoyment such as:
 - Making things (arts and crafts)
 - Collecting things (special objects of interest e.g., spoons, thimbles, rocks, sea shells).

If you would like help to think about activities that interest you, you can find a Modified Interest Check List and a UK Modified Interest Checklist at

<http://www.moho.uic.edu/mohorelatedsrcs.html> - [otherinstrumentsbasedonmoho](#)

Reduce noise

Decrease noise while trying to concentrate because it is more tiring to concentrate with noisy distractions in the environment (e.g., reading with television turned on).

Mental fatigue, like physical fatigue, is not easy to measure. There are few studies that address this problem. It is the aim of this pamphlet to give you some ideas about how you might preserve and increase your mental energy. We have referred to research from cancer literature as well as from other patient populations in an effort to provide tips that you can try to reduce some of the mental fatigue that you may be experiencing.