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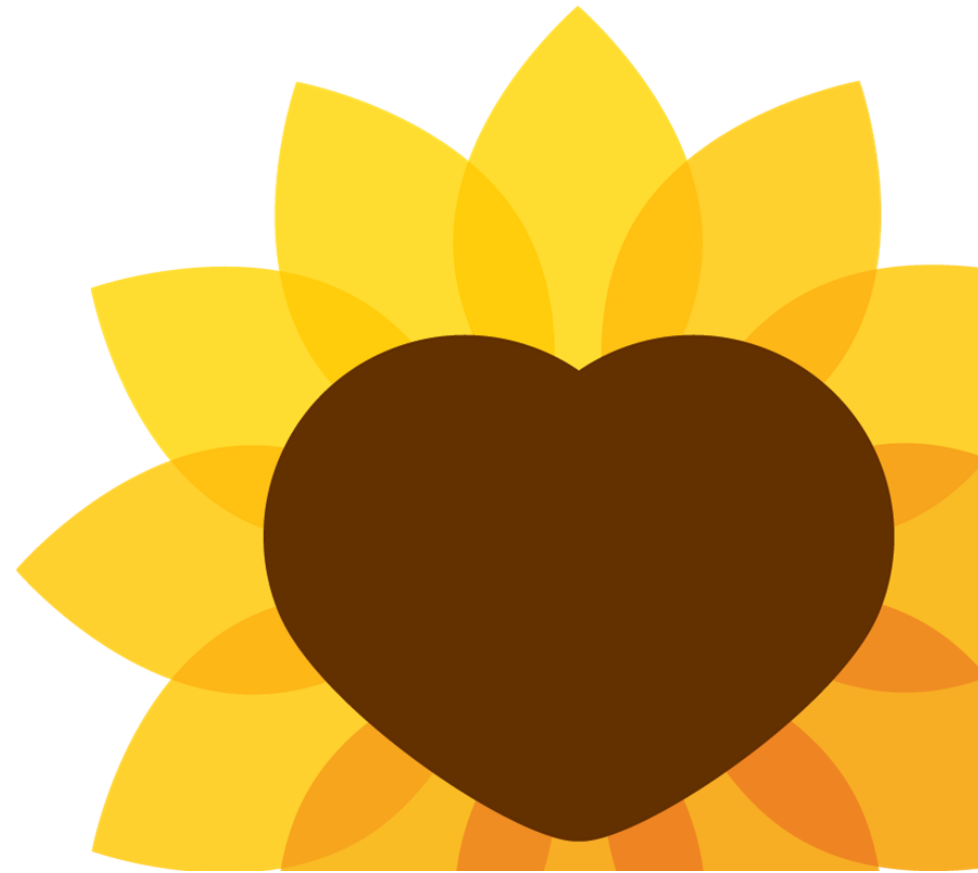
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# Managing Fatigue

A guide to help you understand and manage your fatigue



## What is Fatigue?

Fatigue describes a feeling of overwhelming tiredness or exhaustion that is not relieved by rest. It affects people not only physically, but psychologically and emotionally, and makes everyday tasks more difficult or even impossible to carry out.

This booklet aims to look at some of the causes of fatigue and discusses strategies to help manage this distressing symptom.

## Causes

Fatigue is an extremely common symptom experienced by people with illnesses such as cancer. It can be caused by the illness itself or by treatments such as chemotherapy or radiotherapy. Other causes include anaemia, weight loss, weakness, pain, breathlessness or fluid retention. These symptoms can also worsen existing fatigue, as can some of the psychological effects of the illnesses with which you are dealing. Low mood or anxiety can both contribute to fatigue.

## Who to talk to

It is important to talk to the doctor or nurse involved in your care. They may identify factors which can be addressed, such as anaemia or loss of appetite, or they may refer you to other health care professions such as Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapists, Dietician or Social Workers whose roles will be discussed later in this booklet.

- If you need psychological support your doctor or nurse may be able to refer you for counselling or art therapy.

## Managing setbacks

It is not uncommon to have setbacks with your fatigue following periods of stress by overdoing certain activities. Don't worry about setbacks, these can be managed using the strategies discussed earlier, such as planning, prioritizing and relaxation.

Positive thinking is also very important in managing setbacks. Negative thoughts such as 'I ought to be coping better' or 'I should be doing more' are unhelpful and will add to your distress.

Try to identify and challenge any negative thoughts and find a more positive way of thinking about the situation. For example, why not write down your achievements down (however small) such as going for a walk, getting some housework done, etc, to remind yourself that you have been able to regain control.

Rather than thinking 'I have to do everything just like I always did' instead try telling yourself 'If I pace myself, I can get A and B done today and do C and D later in the week' 'I'll manage it if I do it in stages'. Remember the story of the tortoise and the hare!

### **A thought to finish with:**

**Save your energy to do the things you enjoy most,  
which will maintain or improve your quality of life.**

- Have a day-time nap to 'recharge your batteries' but limit this to an hour or so to prevent problems sleeping at night
- Avoid stimulants such as tea, coffee, cola at night. Milky drinks can help with sleep
- Keep a steady temperature in your bedroom
- Try mental exercises to help get off to sleep, for example reciting a poem, writing a letter in your head, writing alphabetical lists of names or countries.

## Relaxation & stress management

Stress and anxiety use up energy and can increase your fatigue.

Make time for activities which help you to relax.

If you find it difficult to unwind it may be useful to try some specific relaxation techniques, either physical ones where you focus gradually on relaxing all areas of your body or mental techniques to help you relax your mind.

Here are some ideas to help manage stress and help you to relax

- Talk to others about your concerns
- Try some distraction techniques, such as reading, TV, radio, painting, crosswords or listening to music
- Try gentle exercises
- Complementary therapy – it is well worth considering some of the complementary therapies available at the Hospice, such as massage, reflexology and Reiki. A complementary therapist may also be able to discuss some relaxation techniques with you or give you a relaxation tape / CD

## Effects of Fatigue

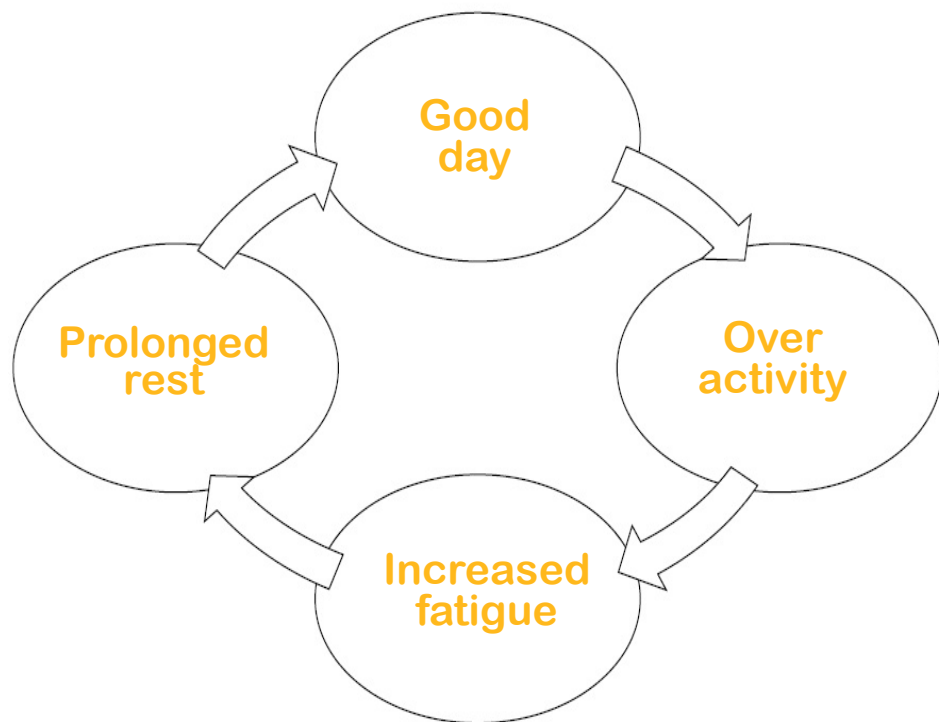
Fatigue often leads to changes in people's activity levels and way of life, such as reducing or even stopping paid work, reducing housework and maintenance work, increasing the need for rest, altering sleep, reducing social activities or hobbies, and affecting concentration.

People may avoid doing certain activities completely as they require too much effort, but this then results in frustration, low mood and reduced fitness levels as muscles weaken.



## The Activity Cycle

A common cycle for people with fatigue involves tending to push themselves until fatigue tells them to stop. This is invariably followed by a period of rest and feelings of frustration.



People tend to stay in the activity cycle because they feel they must get things done, they need to 'finish the job' or they feel guilty if other people are doing things for them.

The strategies outlined in this booklet are designed to break the activity cycle by planning and pacing activities rather than have bursts of over-activity that lead to exhaustion, followed by a reduction in activity and a time of prolonged rest.

Walking is one of the best forms of exercise. Gentle stretching techniques such as Tai Chi, Yoga, and Pilates can also aid suppleness, balance and relaxation. Some people even enjoy exercising using games consoles like a Wii.

If you previously attended a gym this could be gently reintroduced but be sure to discuss current health issues with the gym staff. They may require you to check first with your GP. Gentle chair or bed exercises also help to maintain fitness.

### Risks - do not exercise if:

- You have a high temperature
- You feel dizzy or faint
- You are very short of breath, especially if this is new / sudden
- You have new or unexplained pain
- You have an infection, are anaemic or have low platelets or white cell count

It may be useful to speak to a Physiotherapist for further advice.

## Sleep & rest

It is important to get a balance between exercise and rest / sleep. Try to keep a normal sleeping routine even if you feel tired all the time.

Some tips for good sleep:

- Get up at a similar time each morning – try to avoid spending too much time in bed

## Nutrition & diet

Eating well is key to helping you manage your fatigue:

- Eating little and often may be easier than facing or preparing large meals
- If you find your taste is altered, try new foods which appeal to you
- Fruit smoothies are a great option, as they give you fruit and protein without the need for lots of preparation
- Make sure you drink plenty to avoid dehydration and constipation.

Your Health Worker can give you leaflets on healthy eating or refer you to a Dietician if necessary.

## Exercise & activity

Fatigue will often result in people doing less and becoming inactive. This then causes muscles to weaken, so that when an activity is attempted more energy is then required. This can make you feel frustrated, demoralized and even less active and so the cycle continues.

By maintaining a regular level of activity or exercise you can maintain muscle strength and general conditioning of all your body's systems. It can also help to improve appetite, mood, circulation, bowel function and sleep.

Research shows that gentle exercise is very helpful in managing fatigue. Exercise should be enjoyable, functional and individualised according to fitness and age, taking into account problems such as weakness, pain or breathlessness.

## Pacing, Planning and Prioritising

### Pacing

Pacing means balancing activity so that your day is divided into periods of rest and activity. Pacing can help you manage your day and stay in control. It means doing the activity you had planned, however you feel, but not doing too much or too little. On a bad day stick to your plan but try to break up activities more.

### Planning

Try to plan activities so that more difficult tasks are spread out over a day or week. Plan what order to do things in, decide if you need help to do them or if you need to change the way you do the activity.

If you have times of day when you generally have more energy, it may help to plan your day so that you do certain tasks, such as cooking, housework or gardening at these times. You can also plan your week—for example if you know you will have a busy day Tuesday then you can plan to have a very quiet day on Monday and Wednesday if possible.

### Prioritising

Decide which are the most important things for you to do and make sure you spend your energy doing these, rather than wasting it on less important things. It may be that some tasks can wait until you have more energy, or even that someone else can do them for you.

## Setting goals

It can be helpful to set some goals for yourself. Make sure they are realistic and achievable. If you have a larger goal, maybe break it into smaller steps, for example if you're going on holiday – plan some days out first and progress from there. Choose a goal which will give you enjoyment or a sense of achievement. Write down your goals and tick off when you achieve them.

## Energy conservation at home

Here are some simple solutions to help you save energy at home.

Consider your everyday activities – are you standing to brush your teeth or preparing food, or bending down to sweep? It may be useful to discuss any difficulties with carrying out everyday tasks with an Occupational Therapist – they can advise you on different ways of doing things or provide equipment to help you maintain independence whilst conserving your energy.

One of the key things you can do is to accept offers of help – for example with cooking, shopping and housework. Your Social Worker can give you advice about support in these areas.

## Meal preparation

- Sit on a perching stool to prepare food
- Use some frozen meals that only need microwaving
- Cook double and freeze half
- Try simple 'one pan' meals to minimize washing up.

## Childcare

Looking after children can be tiring for anyone but when you are fatigued the effort required can be overwhelming.

Some ideas which may help include:

- Explaining to your children that you feel very tired & may not be able to do everything you normally do
- Involve your children in small household tasks—pay them some pocket money for this if necessary!
- Plan achievable, enjoyable activities to do with your children eg. watch a DVD together, or sit on a bench whilst they play
- Accept offers of babysitting or lifts to school, so you can rest.

## Work

You may have had to reduce your time at work, or even stop working, but if you have been able to continue there may be ways to make working life more manageable:

- Talk to your employer about how your fatigue affects you – be honest if things are getting too much
- Change / reduce your hours if possible. If you take longer to get ready in the morning negotiate a later start time
- Build short breaks into your day to 'recharge your batteries'
- Discuss alterations to your role if the work is physically demanding, for example if it involves lifting.

You may find it helpful to discuss some of these issues with a Social Worker.