Article Series Managing Fatigue

The Connection Between Fatigue and Mental Health

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Cancer fatigue isn’t just about feeling physically tired. For some people it may also include mental exhaustion.

This exhaustion might make it harder to do activities you once enjoyed. It may also cause you to feel a sense of social disconnection or isolation, especially if you don’t have the energy or desire to socialize. And if you’re experiencing changes to your body and lifestyle because of your cancer, you may find yourself struggling with

your identity and self-image.

Beyond mental exhaustion, there are a range of mental health challenges that may arise in connection with fatigue, including depression, impaired memory, and difficulty focusing.

These might not be the first challenges that come to mind when you think about managing your fatigue. But whatever you're facing, it can be important to think about your physical *and* mental health needs. Because fatigue may not just drain your energy. It may also make it harder to keep up with the activities that fulfill you, like connecting with loved ones, doing work that's meaningful to you, and generally taking part in daily life.

Here are some **Microsteps** that can be taken that may help you take care of your mental health as you manage your fatigue. As always, consult with your care team for the management practices that are best for you.

Spending a few minutes breathing deeply and slowly.

Meditation may help reduce fatigue. You can try meditating in bed, while taking a walk, or any way that's comfortable for you. Inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth. Deep breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system, the body's natural relaxation response. Just five minutes of this conscious breathing can help, but you may find that you see benefits to your stress levels in even less time.

Saying a positive affirmation.

For example, "I am strong" or "I got this." Research suggests that affirmations can decrease stress and increase well-being. And some studies have shown that certain responses to fatigue, such as lower levels of optimism and a tendency to catastrophize, may be linked to greater fatigue.

Keeping a journal to track your fatigue.

Writing about your experiences, including what tires you out, can help you process emotions and see patterns. It can also help you connect the dots between your

physical symptoms and your mood.

Saying no to one commitment that isn’t a priority.

Conserve your energy and reduce stress by giving yourself permission to skip, cancel or reschedule a non-essential activity.

Setting a reminder to check in with someone who boosts your mood.

Social connections can be energizing. Try connecting by phone, video or text with someone who makes you laugh or smile.

Putting one joyful activity on your calendar.

Having things to look forward to can be important for your mental health. It can be as small as planning to watch a favorite TV show, listen to a favorite podcast, or set up a phone date with someone who lifts your spirits.

Trying a new hobby that can be done seated.

Activities like knitting, puzzles, or reading can be relaxing and fulfilling without being physically taxing.

Joining an online class for something you've always wanted to learn.

Whether it's a language, a craft, or a new skill, learning keeps your brain engaged and can also provide a welcome distraction. If there’s something you’ve always wanted to try but never pursued, consider taking the opportunity to get started.

Setting aside time each day to do something creative.

Making time for creative activities like drawing, crafting, or journaling can help you focus on something other than fatigue.

Listening to an audiobook or podcast that helps uplift you.

Listening to something uplifting and inspiring can be a great way to occupy yourself without expending energy.

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