



## FATIGUE MANAGEMENT – HOW HARD WORK CAN BE ENERGIZING

---

### What is Fatigue?

Fatigue can be hard to define – but we know it when we feel it. It goes beyond tiredness or lack of sleep, but is not yet burnout. Burnout, in local and international studies is experienced by as many as 1 in 2 doctors<sup>1,2,3</sup>, whereas fatigue is near-universal, especially in ICU staff<sup>4</sup>. Fatigue can be conceptualised as part of a spectrum, with health on one end and burnout on the other.

Fatigue is transient and reversible. In engineering terms, it is the point where a material is at risk of snapping but remains functional. It saps our energy levels in one or more areas of life, until we are no longer able to function optimally in those domains.

Fatigue ranges severity, chronicity and phenotypes. An individual may experience:

- **Physical fatigue** - tiredness and exhaustion, dulling of reflexes and decreased dexterity<sup>5</sup>.
- **Mental fatigue** - decreased cognitive performance, somnolence, lethargy, difficulty maintaining attention and lack of focus<sup>6</sup>.
- **Emotional fatigue** - exhaustion, irritability, impatience, increased depressive or anxiety symptoms and diminished positive responses to situations previously found enjoyable.
- **Compassion fatigue** - cynicism, diminished ability to empathize or feel compassion for others, or self-centeredness developing in people previously dedicated to their work and patients<sup>7</sup>.
- **Social fatigue** - a new decreased desire for social interactions and social avoidance behaviours.

Although we may be better at identifying physical fatigue, it may require others to point out fatigue in other psychosocial domains before we recognise it in ourselves.

### Causes of Fatigue – Draining Our Energy Banks

Fatigue arises when energy-depleting behaviours and experiences are not equally matched by energy restoring ones.

This energy drain may be work-related, personal, or both. These issues may be short-term or accumulate over time, but all drain our energy levels, like depleted phone batteries. Fatigue may lead to less than optimal performance in our lives, much like the 'low power modes' on a phone.

***Fatigue saps our energy levels in one or more areas of life, until we are no longer able to function optimally in those domains***

Safe Work Australia recognizes the contribution of workplace factors to fatigue and its impact on employees<sup>8</sup>. Work related causes of fatigue may be external or internal to the individual, and may include:

- mismatch or conflict between reality and our expectations, values, preferred communication style or sense of fairness<sup>9</sup>.
- prolonged or intense mental or physical activity
- organisational change

- excessively long shifts
- insufficient recovery between shifts
- long commute
- insufficient or interrupted sleep
- frequent changing of sleep cycles with disruption of your internal body clock
- role ambiguity
- competing demands
- resource limitations
- high patient acuity
- study and exams
- repeated exposure to death and perceived suffering has been linked to compassion fatigue<sup>10</sup>

***Fatigue can arise from a mismatch or conflict between reality and our expectations, values, preferred communication style or sense of fairness.***

Working with certain colleagues or patients can be more draining than others. For instance, when there is a disparity in personalities or communication styles<sup>11</sup> e.g. a colleague who hands over in a different style or an incongruent management plan or direction.

In isolation these behaviours may be irksome, but repeated exposure to conflicting values, expectations, personality, or sense of fairness can contribute to fatigue. It may also be exacerbated in certain situations e.g. high acuity, a busy shift or when experiencing hunger. Insufficient or interrupted sleep is a key factor across all domains, leading to increased fatigue and decreased resilience.

### **Treatment of Fatigue - Moving from a Work-Life Balance to an Energy Balance**

A large-scale trial would be unlikely to find one single, universal, cure for fatigue. A better approach would be for each individual see what interventions may improve their individual fatigue levels and how they can best restore and balance their energy levels.

Rather than a 'work-life balance', it may be helpful to consider establishing an 'Energy In-Energy Out Balance'. This mindset acknowledges that hard work, like hard exercise, can at times be re-energizing and fulfilling!

***Rather than a 'work-life balance', it may be helpful to consider establishing an 'Energy In-Energy Out Balance'.***

The often-proposed solution of "sleep more and work less" may help temporarily but misses other causative factors of fatigue. Ensuring adequate sleep is wise, but it isn't a panacea for treating fatigue – sleeping more without addressing other issues is bound to fail. Likewise finding ways to enjoy and be re-energised from doing fulfilling work might be more helpful in fatigue management than advice to work less.

***Hard work, like hard exercise, can at times be re-energizing and fulfilling!***

### **Eye-opening exercise:**

1. Write a detailed list of everything you do in a typical day.
2. Now rate each item as an "In" (Activities that fill up your energy reserves and refresh you) or "Out" (Activities taking energy out of your reserves).
3. Now evaluate if you can easily get rid of any "Out" items and put more "In" items in your day.
4. Lastly, explore if you can adjust any of the remaining "Out" items in ways so they don't take as much energy out of you each day.

Restoring your energy levels might mean doing less each day, or it might mean making time to do more things you enjoy. Only you will know what works for you!

## **Helpful Steps in Managing Fatigue and Energy Levels**

- 1. Identify your own fatigue and the domains most effected**
  - a. Are you feeling fatigued? Have others noticed any signs of fatigue in you?
  - b. In what ways is your fatigue stopping you from performing and living at an optimal level?
  
- 2. Identify specific causes or factors contributing to your fatigue**
  - a. What specifically causes the biggest drain on your energy levels, and contributes most to your physical, mental, emotional, compassion or social fatigue?
  - b. Which of these factors do you see as sustainable long-term with adequate rest, and which factors need change?
  
- 3. Be proactive - address or change factors that require change**
  - a. Early recognition and action can reverse fatigue and prevent burnout.
  - b. Some factors may seem unchangeable, although people are often surprised at the willingness of senior staff to find workable solutions where possible. Management is more likely to respond to specific requests, and with enough time to bring about change.
  - c. If roster structure is contributing to fatigue, have open and ongoing conversations with your colleagues and be open to the concept of change. Swaps can be organised and unit roster pattern changed, moving from traditional week on/week off roster to a variety of different roster structures and shift durations.
  
- 4. Identify what restores your energy levels**
  - a. Identify what reinvigorates you. For some it is time away from work, for others it is the opportunity to take on a passion project they find rewarding within work.
  - b. Do you recharge through time spent alone, or time with friends? Restful inactivity, or vigorous exercise? Time away from technology or time engaging with technology?
  
- 5. Be intentional about rest**
  - a. Plan time for activities you have identified that restore your energy and help you feel rested.
  
- 6. Be willing to say no**
  - a. Saying no to extra tasks can be hard, inside or outside of work. This can be especially true earlier on in your career as a trainee or junior consultant.
  - b. Rationing your time and energy however can help you perform better in the tasks you do.
  
- 7. Be willing to say yes**
  - a. Taking on extra work on topics close to your heart can bring professional satisfaction and reinvigorate energy levels.
  - b. Implementing change projects can be very rewarding and can solve potential stressors or sources of fatigue.
  
- 8. Share the burden with colleagues and family**
  - a. Use your support networks.

- b. Acknowledge your limitations and ask for help where possible.
- c. Support your colleagues and family when your energy levels are higher.

### 9. Consider part-time work

- a. Many ICUs offer part-time work to trainees and consultants. Even if they do not, you could negotiate a new option. Job sharing is another option.
- b. A temporary or permanent change in FTE may help manage fatigue and reinvigorate you, helping you to perform better at work.
- c. Even a small decrease from 1.0 to 0.9 FTE may be sufficient.

### 10. Consider a sabbatical or ways to renew your academic interests

### 11. Take your leave when possible

### 12. Hobbies

- a. Have you always wanted to get your motorbike license, learn to paraglide, take up karate or learn to knit? Why not start now?
- b. It might be the time for an old hobby again - start playing a childhood musical instrument or sport after a decade or two away.

### 13. Take your GP's advice

- a. Drink less alcohol
- b. Eat a healthier diet
- c. Exercise more
- d. Practice good sleep hygiene

Managing our fatigue is not just about avoiding being tired. By being intentional about renewing our energy levels regularly, it is possible to get more done, in a more sustainable and enjoyable way. When we are less fatigued, we are not only less prey to negative emotions; we're also more likely to access the positive emotions to help us perform at our best.<sup>12</sup>

If fatigue leads us to function less than optimally in certain domains, good fatigue management allows us to enjoy life to the full.

---

## Resources

1. beyondblue. National mental health survey of doctors and medical students. Oct 2013. [https://www.beyondblue.org.au/docs/default-source/researchproject-files/bl1132-reporte-nmhdms-full-report\\_web](https://www.beyondblue.org.au/docs/default-source/researchproject-files/bl1132-reporte-nmhdms-full-report_web) (Accessed Nov 2020).
2. Shanafelt TD, Boone S, Tan L, et al. Burnout and satisfaction with work-life balance among US physicians relative to the general US population. *Arch Intern Med* 2012; 172: 1377-1385
3. Imo UO. Burnout and psychiatric morbidity among doctors in the UK: a systematic literature review of prevalence and associated factors. *Psychiatrist* 2017; 41: 197-204.
4. Simpson, N. & Knott, C. I. Stress and burnout in intensive care medicine: an Australian perspective. *Med J Aust* 2017; 206 (3): 107-108. doi: 10.5694/mja16.00626.
5. Berrios, G. E. Feelings of fatigue and psychopathology: a conceptual history. *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 1990. 31 (2): 140–51. doi:10.1016/0010-440X(90)90018-N.
6. Marcora SM, Staiano W, Manning V. Mental fatigue impairs physical performance in humans. *Journal of Applied Physiology* 2009 Jan. 106 (3): 857–64. doi:10.1152/jappphysiol.91324.2008.

- 
7. Venes D, ed. *Taber's Cyclopedic Medical Dictionary*. 23rd ed Philadelphia, PA: F.A. Davis; 2013:526,902,1147-1148, 1740.
  8. Safe Work Australia, Fatigue, <https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/fatigue> (Accessed Nov 2020)
  9. Baigent M, Baigent R, Burnout in the medical profession: not a rite of passage, *MJA* 208 (11) j 18 June 2018
  10. Cross LA. Compassion Fatigue in Palliative Care Nursing: A Concept Analysis. *J Hosp Palliat Nurs*. 2019;21(1):21-28. doi:10.1097/NJH.0000000000000477
  11. Gardner, William L; Martinko, Mark J (2016). "Using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator to Study Managers: A Literature Review and Research Agenda". *Journal of Management*. 22 (1): 45–83.
  12. Schwartz T. Fatigue is your Enemy. *Harvard Business Review* 2012, 92(11) 86-93