Brain Tumors and Fatigue

Fatigue will complicate most symptoms caused by brain tumors. Because we know this to be true, we can use it to our advantage. Problems can be lessened to some degree by monitoring and reducing fatigue triggers. The principle is similar to stress management.

Brain tumor fatigue: potential causes

Fatigue can occur with benign brain tumors and cysts as well as with cancer. While the effects of surgery, radiation and chemotherapy on energy level are well known, brain injury factors are typically overlooked.

Even if the brain tumor has been removed, the “insult” caused by the abnormal growth may be slow to heal. Persons who look fine, do not appear confused and whose behavior seems normal can still show signs of mild brain injury. Cognitive problems can seem to appear and disappear. Such variation of symptoms (on a daily, even hourly basis) is common in brain injury.

“Attentional fatigue” describes the tiredness that comes from having to think about behaviors that used to be easy. Routine tasks now require greater concentration and effort, and may even need to be relearned. Some patients struggle with slowed thinking and mental exhaustion. Others lose the ability to focus on several things at once. Many feel stressed in a noisy or busy place such as a restaurant or mall.

Brain tumor fatigue can occur at diagnosis. It is not only treatment-related!

- **Treatment-related causes can include:**
  - Surgery, anesthesia. Fatigue occurs for up to 1–2 years after most major surgeries, not just those involving the brain.
  - Radiation therapy. Often patients experience delayed response.
  - Chemotherapy, immunotherapy. A loss of mental sharpness known as “chemo-brain” occurs after treatment for many cancers.
  - Anticonvulsant treatment
  - Corticosteroid withdrawal.

- **Generalized and complex partial seizures** cause fatigue.

- **Vestibular disorders** (problems with dizziness and balance) do as well.

- **A sense of urgency to get things done** is heightened with a serious illness. Patients say, *I’m having a good day...I want to make it last.*

- Other factors can include depression, anxiety, chronic pain, “deconditioning” (from prolonged inactivity), low hormone levels, poor nutrition, dehydration, infection, and one-sided hearing or vision loss.
Action steps: Learning a new pace of living

- **Consider brain injury factors.** Activities that used to be relaxing (socializing with friends, going out to eat) may now cause fatigue. Simplify the environment. Limit distractions and reduce competing demands. Families: make one-step requests. Offer fewer choices.

- **Neuropsychological testing** shows even slight cognitive changes, pinpointing those most likely to respond to rehabilitation. This testing can also detect depression and anxiety, both of which respond to treatment.

- **Learn your early signs of fatigue.** Stop activity before becoming overtired. Possible signals of mental fatigue include growing levels of disorganization, frustration, reactivity, restlessness, tearfulness, guilt, irritability, mistakes, speech problems, slowed reaction time, slowed thinking, blurred vision, distractibility, worsening memory, difficulty maintaining focus or concentration, frequently misplacing things.

- **Energy conservation.** Plan short rest periods, and build them into your routine. Allow for recovery time between events. Also remember to ask your physician when it is time to resume light to moderate exercise.

- **Ask:** Are you competing against the person you used to be? Holding yourself to former standards? If so, you might lose the competition. Long-term survivors who feel they have conquered fatigue say they did so by redefining “normal” and accepting the person they are now.

- **Are you in survival mode, or recovery mode?** The same fighting spirit that got you this far is much less rewarding for fatigue management. Survival rarely demands that you fight every minute?

- **Reframing:** Taking a rest or break is not “giving in to the tumor.”

- **Charge your battery.** You now operate without the energy reserves you once had. Resist the pull to keep running on empty. Save time for pursuits that renew your spirit, such as music, meditation, humor.

- Know that **rehabilitation** can include cognitive or vestibular rehabilitation as well as the better known treatments, such as physical therapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy.

Each of these steps can help you cope with reduced stamina in our increasingly fast-paced world. Adopt the ones that work for you.