

*Living Well After  
Brain Cancer Treatment  
Education Series*

# Managing Cognitive Fatigue



Cognitive difficulties are made worse by the brain becoming overly tired, so it is important to address cognitive fatigue in order to begin feeling better. Here are some good ways to start to better manage your cognitive fatigue:

- **Be aware of how and when fatigue affects you.** Track your activities during the day and then note how you feel throughout. Consider using the sample chart below. For example, after doing certain activities or several activities, do you get headaches, become more forgetful or feel irritable? As you track this for several days, you will become aware of how much you can do in a day before you start to exhibit cognitive fatigue symptoms.
- **Schedule your activities and include rest breaks.** Once you have an idea of your activity limits, you can plan accordingly. A good tool is to use a **weekly planner**. Space your daily activities to balance physical and mental exertion and spread them out over the week to avoid overload. This will help keep your mental energy at a consistent level.
- **Balance rest and activity.** It's important to listen to your body and find a level of cognitive activity and rest that works for you. This may need to be adjusted over time. Too much rest can actually lead to tolerating less activity and contribute to more fatigue. Use the chart on the next page to help you find your optimal balance and discover new strategies.
- **Talk to your doctor about physical exercise and what's best for you.** Counterintuitively, moderate exercise can often help increase physical energy and mental alertness. At UCSF, you can ask your doctor about exercise classes and services as part of your care
- **Prioritize activities that are most important.** List your activities in order of how important they are to you, so you can do the more important ones when you have the most energy. Then reduce your planned tasks based on how much energy you have. Consider postponing and/or cancelling some of your least important activities, if possible.

Managing cognitive fatigue is one of the best places to start to begin improve your cognitive health.

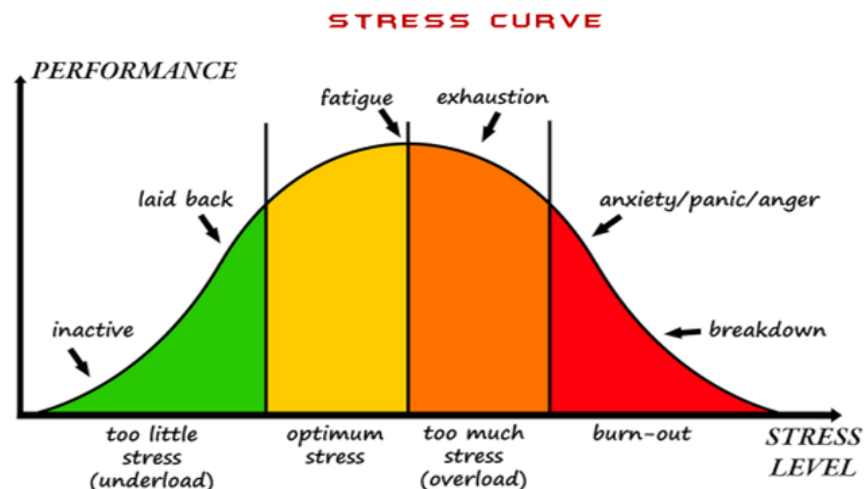
Running out of cognitive energy faster and starting off with less cognitive energy to do tasks is one of the most common side effects of brain cancer and cancer treatments. It can also have a significant impact on your quality of life..



Rev. 8/6/2022

Managing Fatigue continued...

- **Pace yourself and adjust energy exertion.** If you know an activity will take a lot of energy, consider doing tasks in 20-to-30-minute chunks with restful activities in-between. Take a longer rest if needed to stay out of the overexertion zone. Look for less energy-intensive ways to perform activities, such as doing one task at a time and tackling a small piece of a larger project.
- **Delegate tasks and ask for help.** This is a time to take others up on their offers to help you. Let them unpack the groceries, fold and put away the laundry, or help you with other tasks.
- **Eat a balanced diet.** Follow physician or nutritionist recommendations and be sure to drink enough water to avoid dehydration. UCSF offers cancer patients a complementary [consultation](#) with an oncology dietitian. You can also view our [Integrative Approaches to Brain Cancer series](#) for more specific suggestions.
- **Engage in self-care and stress-reducing activities.** Taking in a full, deep breath throughout the day only takes a few seconds. Other activities could be meditation, prayer, talking with others, reading, listening to music, painting, or anything else you find pleasurable. You may want to set reminders to include these throughout your day.



(Illustration of the Yerkes-Dodson human performance and stress curve)

Situation What was going on?	Fatigue symptoms	Color Zone	Strategy to bring you closer to Green	Was this strategy effective? Why or why not?
i.e. Out for lunch with friend, then grocery shopping, then home to make dinner.	i.e. Drained feeling-low strength. Keep forgetting what step I am on for recipe.	Yellow and border orange	Sitting for 10 minutes to meditate or doing deep breathing exercises.	Yes. Felt more focused