FREE GUIDE · BRAIN INJURY

Fatigue after brain injury or stroke: a smaller budget, higher prices

Why fatigue after a brain injury or stroke is different from ordinary tiredness, and how pacing helps you do more of what matters.

New or sudden symptoms need urgent help. If someone has sudden weakness or numbness, a drooping face, slurred speech, sudden confusion, a severe headache or a seizure, call 999. Fatigue alone is common after brain injury, but new symptoms should never be put down to it.

"I'm not tired like I used to be tired. It's like someone pulls the plug." That's how many people describe fatigue after a brain injury or stroke. It's one of the most common and least understood effects, and because nobody can see it, people are often told they look fine. This guide explains what is going on, and how to manage your energy so you can do more of what matters.

Why brain injury fatigue is different

Ordinary tiredness comes after effort and goes away with rest. Fatigue after a brain injury or stroke is different. It can come on suddenly, it can be out of proportion to what you've done, and it isn't always fixed by resting or sleeping. Mental fatigue can feel like your brain is shutting down: you can't follow a conversation, find words, think straight or make a decision.

What is going on in the brain

Most of what we do every day runs on autopilot: walking, talking, reading a room, filtering out background noise. Autopilot is efficient. It's cheap, and it doesn't cost much energy.

A brain injury can knock some of those processes off autopilot. Things that used to be automatic now need conscious effort, and conscious effort is expensive. The brain may also be working harder to route around damaged areas, and sleep and alertness systems can be affected too.

I often explain it with tokens. Imagine you wake up with a bucket of tokens to spend on everything you do. After a brain injury, the bucket may be smaller, and many activities cost more than they used to. A supermarket trip that used to cost 5 tokens might now cost 30: the lights, the noise, the choices, the people, the queue. Same day, smaller budget, higher prices.

When the tokens run out

When the bucket empties, the brain cuts what it sees as non-essential. You might become irritable or tearful, lose your words, struggle to concentrate, feel flat or low, or want to shut yourself away. Families

sometimes read this as a personality change or depression. Often it is overload. That's not to say low mood isn't real after brain injury (it's common, and treatable), but it's worth checking the budget first.

The boom and bust trap

On a good day, it's tempting to catch up on everything: the washing, the emails, the visit you've been putting off. Then you crash for two days. Then you feel better, so you do everything again. The good days are causing the bad days.

The way out feels wrong at first: **do roughly the same amount every day, good or bad, and stop before you're empty.** Little and often. Leave some tokens in the bucket.

Pacing in practice

1. Find your baseline

Keep an energy diary for a week or two. Note what you did, how much it cost (0–10), and how you felt afterwards and the next day. You're looking for patterns: which activities are expensive for *you*, what time of day you're at your best, and what pushes you over the edge.

2. Plan the week, not just the day

Spread expensive activities out. Don't put a hospital appointment, a family visit and a supermarket trip on the same day. Put the hardest thing at your best time of day.

3. Prioritise

For each task, ask: is it essential? Do I enjoy it? Could someone else do it? Could I do it less often, or differently? Spend your tokens on the things that matter most to you, not just the things that shout loudest.

4. Break it up

Split big tasks into chunks with rests in between. Sit down to do things you used to do standing. Make the environment easier: fewer choices, less clutter, less noise.

5. Rest before you need to

Take breaks *before* you're exhausted, not after. Real rest means low input: lying down in a quiet room, gentle music, a few minutes of slow breathing. TV, phones and reading can be surprisingly tiring for an injured brain. If you nap, keep it short (around 30 minutes) and not too late in the day, so it doesn't steal your night's sleep.

6. Protect your sleep

Regular bed and wake times, a wind-down routine, a cool, dark, quiet room, and no caffeine or alcohol in the hours before bed.

7. Take the load off your memory

Checklists, alarms, a diary and writing things down all save tokens, so there's more left for living.

8. Build up slowly

Once your baseline is steady, increase a little at a time, by about 10% every week or two, and only if the extra doesn't cost you the next day.

It's a bit like going back to the gym after an illness: you can't pick up where you left off, and trying to only sets you back.

Helping the people around you understand

Fatigue is invisible, so it's easy for others to misread. It can help to share the token idea with family, friends and employers: "I've got a smaller budget and things cost more. When I leave early or say no, I'm not being rude. I'm paying for tomorrow."

A conversation with your brain

"Brain, we feel great today. Let's do everything."
"Yes! Washing, shopping, emails, the visit…"
"What happened last time we did that?"
"…Two days in bed."
"So let's pick two, and leave some tokens for tomorrow."

When to get more help

Talk to your GP if fatigue is getting worse, if you're struggling with mood, or if medicines might be making you drowsy. You can ask about referral to a neuropsychologist or occupational therapist, who can help you build a personal pacing plan. Headway's helpline is 0808 800 2244.

Worksheets

You'll find these printable worksheets at the end of this PDF:

- **Energy diary**: a two-week log of activities, cost and recovery
- **My weekly pacing plan**: spread the expensive things across the week
- **Explaining my fatigue**: a short note to share with family, friends or work

Further help

- Headway: the brain injury association, with a helpline (0808 800 2244) and fatigue booklets.
- Stroke Association: information and support after stroke.
- NHS: stroke symptoms (FAST): when to call 999.

Written by Dr Monica Berntsen, HCPC-registered Consultant Psychologist and Neuropsychologist. This guide is for general information and isn't a substitute for individual assessment or treatment.

Want some help with this?

I offer online therapy across the UK. Get in touch at drmonicaberntsen.com/contact and I'll suggest the best next step.

Read this guide online, and find more free guides, at drmonicaberntsen.com/resources.

WORKSHEET 1

Energy diary

For one to two weeks, log what you did, how much it cost (0 = nothing, 10 = everything), and how you felt afterwards and the next morning.

Day / time	Activity	Cost /10	Rest taken	Fatigue after /10	Next morning /10

WORKSHEET 2

My weekly pacing plan

Spread expensive activities across the week. Put the hardest thing at your best time of day, and plan rest before you need it.

	Morning	Afternoon	Evening
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thu			
Fri			
Sat			
Sun			

WORKSHEET 3

Explaining my fatigue

A note to share with family, friends or work. Fill in the gaps in your own words.

Since my injury / stroke, fatigue feels like…

Things that cost me the most energy now

Signs that I'm running out (what you might notice)

What helps me most

What I'd like you to do when you notice I'm running out