

## Fatigue at Work

### Understanding fatigue and what to do about it at work

Fatigue is a naturally occurring human condition. We each have our own internal clock that determines when we are tired and when we need to rest. In order to function optimally, we need to pace ourselves during the day alternating between work and breaks. Furthermore, we all need restorative sleep in order to re-energize and take on daily challenges.

Many of us, however, are not doing what is needed to help us manage our fatigue. This includes taking enough rest breaks, eating healthy snacks and meals, and exercising regularly. As a result, many of us suffer from poor sleep. The results at work can be costly in terms of reduced concentration, poor performance, increased error rate, and lost productivity. All this can affect a business's bottom line.

It is important to distinguish between physical fatigue and cognitive fatigue. Physical fatigue may be related to the above factors and/or the underlying cause can be due to disease, medication or a sleep disorder. It is therefore important to visit your family doctor to discuss your fatigue and rule out any serious underlying cause. If one is found, then appropriate treatment will need to be discussed with your doctor.

#### Physical Fatigue: Sleepiness

- Difficulty staying awake
- Drowsiness
- Heavy eyelids
- Head drooping
- Yawning
- Wanting to lie down
- Mind drifts, lose focus

#### Cognitive Fatigue: Tiredness

- Difficulty concentrating
- Poor attention
- Reduced memory
- Ineffective communication
- Error prone
- Want to sit down/rest
- No energy to do anything
- Drained at the end of a day
- Bored/depressed/irritable

Cognitive fatigue can be triggered by overwork, stress or emotional issues. These need to be addressed to assist someone who is having difficulty while at work to perform better on the job. They will also need to be addressed when preparing a person to return to work.

Fatigue management can be carried out at the level of the Person, the Occupation, and the Environment. An individual needs to take control of his/her own well being



Work Information Newsletter is developed by Adeena Wisenthal, registered occupational therapist and owner of ERGO-Wise, a centre in Ottawa that specializes in workplace mental health.

This issue focuses on fatigue in the workplace. This topic was originally presented in December 2008 through videoconference to the Association of Professional Executives (APEX) of the Public Service of Canada to address Executive Health and Well-being.

## Fatigue at work is costly to all!

Reference: Health Canada

With an average of less than 5 hours sleep/night, cognitive performance begins to decline.

After only 1 week of partial sleep restriction, subjects often underestimate their own degree of sleep related impairment. Being tired all the time becomes the new normal and we don't realize the extent to which we are tired.

Research indicates that **6 hours** is the **minimum** sleep requirement for most people. Most experts recommend that adults get between 7 and 8 hours nightly.

*Take steps to combat workplace fatigue*

## Fatigue

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through healthy living (e.g., regular exercise, positive self talk, avoid caffeine) and good sleep hygiene (e.g., regular bedtime, calming music, warm bath).

At work, it is important to set goals, establish priorities, and break tasks down into manageable smaller sub-tasks. It is also important to pace oneself, alternate cognitively demanding tasks with less mentally challenging ones, and undertake such tasks based on energy levels (e.g., less demanding tasks during times of higher fatigue).

The workplace environment needs to be accommodating and supportive. Training should be made available as required.

A Fatigue Management Program should consider workplace conditions (noise, temperature, breaks, areas for rest); task type (repetitive, challenging); scheduling issues (shift work, long hours, overtime, time zones); and work culture (accepting fatigue management principles).

Fatigue is one of many factors that can affect mental health in the workplace. Other factors include: overwork, job match, stress, personal issues, deadlines, inadequate resources, and interpersonal

issues. We all have a vested interest in ensuring that our workplaces are healthy environments to ensure that employees remain healthy and can contribute to the organization. Employees are the most important resource for a business. They need to be made to feel that they are ap-



preciated and that the employer cares for their well-being. In such a climate, employees will perform at their maximum resulting in a win-win.

### Fatigue

#### Physical Signs

- Sleepiness
- Tiredness
- Loss of appetite
- Digestive problems
- Increased susceptibility to illness

#### Emotional Signs

- Irritability
- Depression
- Giddiness

#### Cognitive Signs

- Reduced concentration
- Poor memory
- Reduced thinking ability

### Fatigue Management: The Big Picture

- ✓ Rule out disease – see your doctor
- ✓ Include physical exercise in your day
- ✓ Proper nutrition – protein, healthy snacks, less fatty foods
- ✓ Engage in enjoyable recreational activities

ERGO-Wise specializes in workplace mental health. We assist employers promote healthier work environments by offering consultation services including solution-focused problem solving and direct strategies for workplace problems. We help employers in meeting their duty to accommodate employees with physical and/or emotional needs.

We prepare employees to return to work by developing the cognitive work skills they require to be successful at the job as well as addressing the emotional issues related to return-to-work after a disability leave.

Contact us to find out how our team of professionals can make a difference in your workplace!

- Skill development
- Job coaching
- Supportive counselling
- Job accommodation
- Return-to-work programs
- Ergonomics
- Pain management
- Education, Healthy Lifestyle

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