

Post-Polio Fatigue

Peter Way

"Makes me tired just thinking about it"

Energy ain't what it used to be. For me it's hard to tell if it is a result of enjoying life in my 60s, or if it is a result of Post-Polio + aging. Einstein found that $E=mc^2$ (Whatever that means). I like to tell people that for Polio survivors $E=mc$.¹

Levels of Exertion

There are several levels of exertion that are relevant to Polio survivors: tiredness, fatigue and exhaustion.

Tiredness

I'll define Tiredness as the feeling you get when you have taken on a task that requires reasonable physical, emotional or mental effort. If it is a worthwhile activity, like taking a moderate walk outside, coaching a child that needs help, or solving a financial problem, you will feel tired with a sense of accomplishment. A short rest will re-energize you and you will feel able to take on other tasks. It is like pulling on a spring – it bounces back and can be used again.

Fatigue

Is an overwhelming tiredness that requires significant rest for recovery. In the spring analogy, if you pull it far enough it will take a set in a new position and not be able to bounce back completely. Fatigue symptoms include:

- Reduced energy or desire for daily tasks and projects.
- Muscle fatigue – heavy and tired, accompanied by pain or flu-like feelings.
- Generalized aching when doing "too much". It feels like a buzzing inside the body and dull ache. It seems like you haven't slept for days.
- Mental exhaustion. Lack of concentration, memory, mistakes you would not make, inability to remember words, people's names, faces or maps.

An interesting article on fatigue² describes these effects. It describes a **reticular activating system** in the bulbar section of the spinal cord at the base of the brain. It normally is a gate keeper dampening effects of overstimulation: loud noises, etc. It also regulates detailed thought. It also coordinates actions like eating, walking, and other body functions. If you want to go deeper on this, review this article³. In The Polio Paradox⁴, Richard Bruno describes the function of this area of the brain. Basically, damage to brain-activating neurons resulted in compromised levels of needed neurochemicals ACHT and dopamine. An ACTH deficiency can result in weakness and fatigue among other joys. Dopamine is one of the most fundamental neurochemicals and allows information to be passed from one neuron to another.

Many of us Polio survivors did well in life in a variety of ways, so the hypothesis is that the remaining neurons tried to do double duty. When they die, you get some of the extra mental fatigue symptoms of PPS. While it is intellectually interesting to know all this stuff, we're stuck with what we have, so overly ruminating on cause-effect won't help unless we can discern some strategies for life. Perhaps the best place to start is to give yourself some grace in all of this – PPS effects are not your fault.

Exhaustion

This is a condition caused by repeatedly or overwhelmingly becoming fatigued to the point where you just can't catch up with rest. It may be the result of physically exercising too hard on a frequent or long-term basis, persistent family trauma, lacking sleep, or a job that is too demanding without relief. In this case, the spring not only deforms without ability to return to its former shape, but eventually breaks. Before that point is reached it would be healthy to stop and evaluate what has led to exhaustion, perhaps with professional help. Our goal with PPS is to never get to the exhaustion level.

Some personal fatigue experiences

- It takes more effort to start tasks that take physical effort, however, sometimes when those tasks are fun or accomplish a goal, I feel happy and energized.
- Loud noises, especially in restaurants or movies can irritate.
- Overdoing physical exercise like (in my case) sailing, biking, or running around in airports leads to overwhelming tiredness that can last for days. Good levels of exercise like swimming 40 minutes or riding a handcycle for an hour can feel energizing and tiring at the same time. Unfortunately, I have had to give up whitewater kayaking and downhill skiing to manage fatigue and preserve the body.
- Sitting too much and watching TV can actually induce fatigue and pain, and disengage the mind. If my brain is eventually dissected they may find cauliflower.
- I feel frustration at not getting enough done each day compared with prior years. I'm sure this is true of everyone who starts down the wonderful journey of middle age. Some people can get benefit by doubling down on activity and exercise. This is exactly the opposite of what you need to do with Polio.

Strategies for managing fatigue

We need to manage our sleep and our day more carefully than most people. It's also clear that not everyone is the same for how much to budget for practical demands like shopping, work, etc. By all means, if you succeed in just getting tired and not fatigued, celebrate what you accomplished.

- Begin the day with a great protein breakfast. I alternate between eggs/bacon/spinach, and oatmeal with nuts and fruits. Healthy eating all around is our best medical plan. Focus on basic foods: protein, vegetables, fiber instead of packaged foods. Conquer Fatigue⁵ is a great book for those who want to know more. Nutrition is a big area, and you can get free consultations at Natural Grocers for example. A great site for linking

activities and foods that help with dopamine levels: <https://bebrainfit.com/increase-dopamine>

- Plan the day – listen to your body. Manage when you are going to do your physically demanding tasks like shopping, exercising for when your body prefers them. If you're planning to do a demanding task one day, don't exercise that day. Budgeting our energy is just as important as budgeting finances if your resources are limited.
- Choose carefully the one or two tasks you will get done that day. We live in a society that values busyness. Look back over a month of activity and consider the tasks that really made a difference vs. ones that you didn't have to do or did not feed your soul.
- Decide when you will take a break and put that into your phone timer.
- Choose the times to make mental efforts for when you are at your best. Some people are best in the morning, others late at night.
- Alternate between physical and mental efforts.
- Plan a 20-minute rest if you're tired in the morning, afternoon, or just before going out. Even that short time can make a difference. It's best without a phone, book etc.
- Rests that are too long can make it more difficult to go to sleep at night. Good tiredness may help with sleeping at night.
- Electric scooters can really help in big box stores. They must all have read nightmarish retail textbooks that say: "put the most important basics at the rear corners of the store, so your customers will travel through everything". Ok, then, let's just shop online and see how they like it!
- Similarly, riding golf carts or wheelchairs at airports may help. They don't exactly stroke my ego, though.
- We only have so much energy, so perhaps reserve your energy for fun, creative tasks and hire people to do the mundane uninteresting tasks – house cleaning, car maintenance, etc. I have a great shop, but let the tire company rotate the tires.
- Finally, high quality sleep is important. This is a huge subject, but needs some research to figure out if you're getting the right amount of REM, light and deep sleep. If you feel tired right from waking up it may be time to have a sleep evaluation.

¹ c is the speed of light, which is a really big number 3×10^8 m/s!!

² 2018 Newsletter of Rancho Los Amigos Post-Polio Support Group by Richard Daggett and Mary Atwood. http://www.ranchoppsg.com/Newsletter_2018-02.pdf

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reticular_formation#Ascending_reticular_activating_system

⁴ The Polio Paradox, Richard Bruno. Chapter: Brain Brownout.

⁵ Conquer Fatigue by Dr. Elizabeth Walker

© 2018 Peter Way

You may repost this article unmodified in its entirety, with a link to: www.coloradopolio.org