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DISORDERS ASSOCIATION

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Fatigue, Stress and Responsibility

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Fatigue

Many people with vestibular disorders cope with a chronic illness and must adapt to a slower pace. Their medical condition is not always visible, so others may not understand their condition or their fatigue.

If you have a chronic vestibular disorder, you probably struggle with fatigue that may rob you of your spontaneity. When you're feeling well, you may tend to overdo and then pay for it later.

It's important to learn to deal with fatigue and get needed rest. It may require making tough but necessary decisions to cut back. This is a big change for many people.

Particularly critical is recognizing early indicators of fatigue so you know when to pull back. Learn to do a self-check; then do what is necessary to regenerate yourself. You need to do what is best for you.

Contributors to fatigue

Stress is a by-product of a need to perform; you create this need, or it is placed on you by others. A high-stress level depletes energy.

Pain is a contributor to fatigue. With pain, the body is easily depleted because it is on constant alert. In addition, when coping with a constant state of fatigue, a person is not always aware of his or her true degree of fatigue.

A damaged vestibular system depletes energy because the brain has to sort and interpret many false messages about spatial orientation, muscles must work vigilantly to help maintain balance, more effort is required to keep the vision focused, and a person must work harder in order to concentrate.

Another factor that sometimes contributes to fatigue is the guilt that can arise when a person is unable to function as well as before having a health problem. This is compounded if it is accompanied by the sense that others perceive you as lazy. Learning to accept what you can and can't do is important. Learn to adjust to the standards you set for yourself. If not, guilt and grief can deplete your energy.

Coping with fatigue

To avoid overexertion, learn to identify and set priorities. Evaluate what is important by asking yourself: *What tasks absolutely need to be done? Do*

*I need to be the one to do these tasks,
or can someone else do them?*

Live by the goals you set for yourself rather than what you think others expect. If you let society or the expectations of others determine your priorities, you may jeopardize your health and increase your fatigue.

Learn to accept what you can do and what you can't. Don't take on too much. Consider saying "no" instead of "yes." You can always say "let me think about it" before you say "yes." Remember, you are the one in charge of your life.

One positive coping strategy is to ask for help and to accept it. Receiving help from others is a way of freeing yourself to do what you consider most important.

Also vital to preserving energy is getting adequate sleep, proper nutrition, and exercise. Inadequate sleep deprives a body of necessary rest. A poor diet significantly affects energy levels—eating well-balanced meals enhances both mental and physical well-being. Finally, unused muscles tend to atrophy, so regular exercise is important.

Present and past

Ask yourself: *Am I focused on the past—who I was and what I used to be able to do? Am I hanging on to what used to be?* Dwelling on the past can drain energy. A positive focus supports current abilities.

Letting go of "what was" involves allowing time to grieve for the losses. After that, a person is better able to move forward to "what is." This allows freedom to focus on things that are possible and rewarding.

If a person is having difficulty accepting a situation, dealing with the expectations of others, or setting priorities, seeking professional help can be very productive. Some people consider the act of getting such help as a sign of weakness. However, with the goal of getting "back on track," seeking professional help is actually a sign of strength.

Controlling fatigue

- Take control of your medical condition; learn about the disorder and the options available for managing it.
- Identify and attend to your priorities.
- Maintain an even pace. Balance activity with rest.
- Identify energy drains and take steps to minimize them.
- Accept your limitations.
- Strive for a positive attitude.
- Be honest with yourself.

Stress

Stress can contribute to illness. For people with chronic health problems such as balance disorders, stress can exacerbate symptoms. The ability to cope with symptoms can be complicated further by misunderstandings that might arise when a person has a

health problem that is somewhat invisible to others (for example, if there are no obvious signs such as a wheelchair or crutches). In this case, family and friends may have difficulty understanding why certain activities are no longer possible; people with invisible health impairments can find themselves in the stressful position of justifying themselves.

Learn to do a self-check.

Learn to identify and set priorities.

Learn to accept what you can do and what you can't.

There are three steps to managing stress:

1. *Recognize symptoms of stress by tuning in to what your body is telling you.* For example, if you've noticed that a headache or sensation of tension in the back of your neck typically accompanies stressful times for you, learn to heed this signal.
2. *Identify the sources of your stress.*
3. *Take action to manage stress.*
Maintain healthy eating habits, get adequate rest and exercise, and follow medical advice. Don't hesitate to ask for needed help. Consider joining a support group.

Openly communicate with friends. Learn to laugh—a sense of humor is an excellent coping mechanism. Your

personal philosophy of life and your attitude can make a difference in how you feel about yourself and in how others interact with you.

Take responsibility for your own well-being

- Educate yourself. Ask questions. Read all you can in order to understand your diagnosis. Ask your doctor for an explanation of the expected treatment results and the amount of time treatment might take. Follow your doctor's advice and directions.
- Assess yourself. Try to determine which activities or situations worsen your symptoms and which make them better. A daily diary may help.
- Keep fit. Gradually work into a regular exercise program. If a physical therapy program is prescribed for you, follow it consistently. For best balance, try to achieve your ideal weight.
- Pay attention to your diet. The vestibular system is sensitive to stimulants such as caffeine (coffee, tea, colas, and chocolate). These foods and alcohol and tobacco can increase symptoms. Foods containing high amounts of salt or sugar may also increase symptoms in some people. Be aware of how certain foods affect you.
- Adjust your environment. If bright lights and loud noises affect you, minimize your exposure to them. Visit shopping malls or grocery stores when they are least crowded. Avoid driving in conditions that aggravate

symptoms such as when windshield wipers are required. Try to avoid circular freeway ramps. Avoid night driving.

- Interact with others. Help your family and friends understand your disorder. Don't become isolated.
- Inform your friends and family about your needs. It may be difficult for others to understand why you can't participate fully in some activities. When discussing your needs, be

specific about what will work best for you.

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