



Managing Fatigue for Employment After Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)

Fatigue is a common symptom after a traumatic brain injury (TBI). It can cause exhaustion, low energy, or trouble staying alert. These changes can make workplace tasks more challenging.

Types of Fatigue Seen in the Workplace After TBI

With **mental fatigue**, concentrating and thinking take more effort. It can make it hard to focus on tasks at work. **For example, this may include:**

- Struggling to process emails
- Finding it hard to focus during meetings
- Making errors on detailed tasks
- Slower reaction times

With **physical fatigue**, the body must work harder to complete tasks that were once routine. **For example, this may include:**

- Lifting light-weight boxes feels exhausting
- Walking or standing wears you out
- Typing and filing take more effort

Psychological fatigue stems from stress, anxiety, or depression. It often results from the challenges of adjusting to life and work after a TBI. **For example, this may include:**

- Worrying about mistakes
- Feeling isolated or self-conscious
- Feeling emotionally exhausted from trying to “keep up”



Tips for Managing Fatigue at Work

- » **Prioritize tasks.** Start your work day by doing the most essential and demanding tasks first, as this is when you have the most energy. Try breaking down large tasks into smaller manageable steps.
- » **Create a flexible schedule.** Shorter workdays, flexible start times, and remote work can help you manage your energy and reduce fatigue.
 - While flexibility and remote work suit some people, many benefit from the structure, cues, and social accountability of an in-person work setting.
- » **Take breaks and find a quiet space.** Frequent, short breaks and access to a quiet space for rest can help reduce fatigue.
- » **Use noise reduction tools.** Earplugs and other devices for noise reduction can help to reduce distractions in a loud environment.
- » **Controlled lighting.** Natural light and soft lights can reduce overstimulation. Low lighting can make people drowsy, so it's important to find a good balance.
- » **Alternate positions.** Use a stool or chair to allow rest during tasks that require standing. Alternating between sitting and standing and taking brief walks within the workspace can support comfort and reduce fatigue.
- » **Give yourself grace when mistakes happen.** Fatigue can impact processing speed and attention to detail. If you make a mistake, try not to be overly critical of yourself. Practicing self-compassion can reduce stress and support overall well-being at work.



Coping Strategies Outside of Work

To manage fatigue, you may need to make lifestyle changes. You may also need to make changes to your work habits to help you find a job and keep it. These changes include the following:

- » Staying active through regular exercise.
- » Building in rest periods as needed to allow for recovery and recuperation.
- » Limiting caffeine and avoiding alcohol, especially before bed.
- » Maintaining a consistent sleep schedule. Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day.

Tips for Managing Fatigue While Looking for a Job

Fatigue after TBI may affect your job search. Try these tips to reduce fatigue when looking for a job:

- » **Use a checklist or planner.** Track what you've done and what's next. This will reduce your mental load and help to conserve your energy.
- » **Apply during your best time of day.** Choose the time when you feel most alert. This may be morning or mid-day.

Real Life Experience

Brittany returned to work as a case manager following her TBI and quickly realized how easy it was to overlook the need to step away, even when her body and mind required rest. As Brittany explained, “I try to remind myself to take breaks because once I get into something, I don’t stop until it’s done. That was really hard with the cognitive fatigue.”



Special Note: You may need support or accommodations from your employer for some of the strategies in this resource. It is up to you whether you want to disclose that you have had a TBI. You can decide which ideas in this resource feel right for you based on your own comfort level and your workplace situation.

Source: The content of this tipsheet was adapted from *Fatigue and Traumatic Brain Injury*, which was developed by Kathleen R. Bell, MD, in collaboration with the Model Systems Knowledge Translation Center (<https://msktc.org/>).

Disclaimer: The contents of the resource were developed under a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR grant number 90DPKT0021). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this resource do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, or HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

Copyright © 2026 American Institutes for Research. May be reproduced and distributed freely with appropriate attribution. Prior permission must be obtained for inclusion in fee-based materials.

