



**Royal Devon  
University Healthcare**  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Managing Fatigue at Work

Produced by the RDUH  
ME/CFS Service



# Explanation of the term ME/CFS

- **ME** = Myalgic encephalomyelitis
  - **Chronic** – long term
  - **Fatigue** – principle symptom
  - **Syndrome** – group of symptoms existing together
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- It is recognised as a **long term neurological condition** by the World Health Organisation (WHO).
  - There is no one diagnostic test for it; ME/CFS is diagnosed based on a clinical presentation.
  - The NICE Guidelines (2021) outline four main symptoms required for diagnosis as:  
**Persistent debilitating fatigue, post exertional malaise, sleep disturbances and cognitive difficulties.**

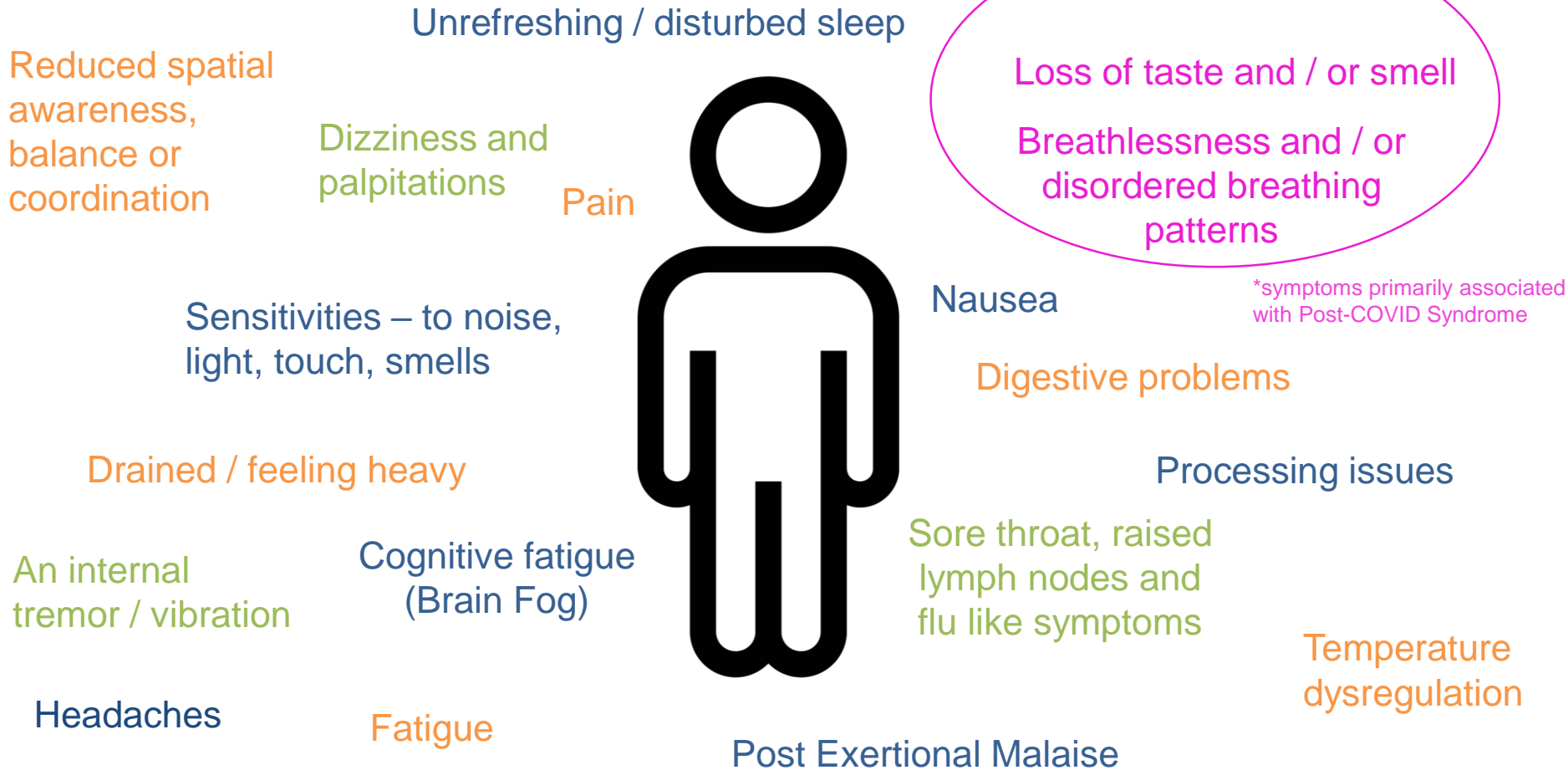
# Explanation of the term Post-COVID Syndrome

As a service we also work with people with **Post-COVID related fatigue**

The NICE Guidelines (2022) provide the following explanation for Post-COVID Syndrome:

- **Signs and symptoms** that develop during or after an infection consistent with COVID-19, **continue for more than 12 weeks** and are **not explained** by an alternative **diagnosis**.
- It usually presents with **clusters of symptoms**, often **overlapping**, which can **fluctuate** and **change over time** and can affect any **system in the body**.

# Symptoms of ME/CFS and Post-COVID Fatigue



# Disclosing your Health Condition

## Concerns

- Concern over lack of understanding and judgement.
- Concern over job loss.
- Concerns of being unable to progress / gain promotions due to health.
- Perceived as less able in the eyes of others and self.
- Over compensate and push self in working role.
- Feelings of guilt.

# Disclosing your Health Condition

## Benefits

- Increase understanding of the difficulties you are experiencing.
- Reasonable adjustments can be implemented.
- Access to occupational health support.
- Offer you a sense of relief for being open and honest.
- Work colleagues / managers may have personal experience / knowledge of the condition.

# Communication

Assertive communication is when you express your own **feelings, rights, needs and opinions** whilst respecting those of others.

- Active listening.
- Using 'I' statements.
- Saying 'no' and giving yourself thinking time.
- Planning & rehearsing.
- Respecting yourself and others.
- 3 step technique.

# Examples of Positive Health Statements

- I have a health condition that I am learning how to manage. If I could work flexible hours to avoid rush hour traffic I would have more energy for work.
- I have a disability which requires me to take frequent rest breaks to stay productive. Ensuring I can take these consistently will reduce the likelihood of me needing to take sick leave.
- I frequently need to take medication for pain. I would benefit from a supportive chair which will also help me manage my pain more effectively.
- I experience fatigue and pain due to my ME/CFS which I am learning how to manage. To enable me to pace myself better I need to vary my work tasks and / or working hours.



# Employment Law

## Health and Safety Act 1974

- Includes adequate welfare provisions for staff at work, e.g. windows.
- Adequate training of staff to ensure their health and safety.
- Facilities for rest and to eat meals.
- Manual handling, visual / video display unit guidelines.

## The Employment Rights Act 1996

- Provided an overarching framework for individual employee rights in the UK.
- The flexible working regulations 2014 amended this Act:
  - Can include: job sharing; working from home; part-time working; working compressed hours; flexi-time; annualised hours contracts; staggered hours; phased retirement.
  - Anyone can ask for this whether they have a health condition or not.

# Employment Law

## The Equality Act 2010

- This Act protects you from discrimination in the workplace.
- A person is defined as disabled under the Act if they have **“a physical or mental impairment, which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities”**.
- **Many long-term conditions such as ME/CFS & Post COVID fatigue are likely to be covered by the Equality Act.**
- If an employer is not willing to recognise any workplace disadvantage because of ME/CFS (or long COVID) and make reasonable adjustments, this may be regarded as discrimination under the Act.

# Reasonable Adjustments

## Working hours

- Extended phased return to work.
- Reduction in hours.
- Altered working hours e.g. starting later / earlier to ease commuting.
- Part-time or job sharing.

## Time away / breaks from work

- Allowing paid time off to attend medical appointments.
- Allowing regular breaks throughout the day as well as entitled lunch breaks.
- Allowing sick leave related to the long-term health problem to be recorded and counted differently to sick leave for other reasons.

# Reasonable Adjustments

## Environment & equipment

- Quiet work space e.g. own office or working from home all or part time.
- Software e.g. voice recognition, Dictaphone.
- Ergonomic assessment to identify equipment needs e.g. supportive chair.

## Travel & parking

- Reduced need to travel e.g. altered hours to avoid rush hour commute.
- Designated car parking space close to the employee's nearest entrance.

## Extra support

- Redeployment opportunities.
- Regular reviews and supervision opportunities.

# A Solution Focused Approach: Challenges, Needs, Solutions

| Challenges  | Needs  | Solutions  |
|---|--|--|
| <i>List the ways in which the symptoms you experience impact your working life.</i> | <i>List what you need in order to overcome each challenge.</i> | <i>List the potential solutions which will help to meet your needs.</i>  |
| Commuting in rush hour is exhausting and demands a lot of my energy.                | I need to manage how I spend my energy throughout the day.     | Change my working hours to avoid rush hour and / or work from home.  |
| I find sitting and standing for long periods uncomfortable and exhausting.          | I need to recognise which activities fatigue me the most.      | Review my duties and my posture when carrying them out. Consider getting a more supportive chair or a sit / stand desk.    |
| I find attending long meetings difficult due to 'brain fog'.                        | I need to find ways to manage attending team meetings.         | Meet with line manager to suggest limiting the time and recording the meeting which may help me, and be useful for others. |

# Fatigue Management Strategies – Applying these to your Workplace

## Plan

- Think about developing routines.
- Spread work activities across the day / week / month.
- Consider the time of day for an activity.

## Pace

- Avoid multi-tasking.
- Give yourself permission to slow down.
- Have regular rest breaks.

## Prioritise

- **D**o it - Can I do it differently? Consider environment / posture / timings.
- **D**elay it - Does it all need to be done now?
- **D**elegate it - Does it need to be done by me?
- **D**itch it - Does it need to be done at all?

# Fatigue Management Strategies – Applying these to your Workplace

## Sharing fatigue analogies with colleagues

- This can increase their understanding of your health needs.
- e.g. – human battery, rest being a prescription, pillars or poles of rest.

## Positive health statement

- Having these rehearsed and easily accessible to use.
- Have a variety rehearsed for different situations.

## Keeping healthy at work

- Ensure you are taking regular screen breaks.
- Having your allocated lunch breaks.
- Refuelling with food and water.

# Fatigue Management Strategies Continued

## Supporters workshop

- As a service we offer a supporters workshop for friends / family / and colleagues.
- This can increase colleagues' levels of understanding around the condition.

## Sleep routines at home

- Regular wake up times.
- Wind down routines in the evenings.

## Engaging in enjoyable activities at home

- Restorative and enjoyable activities can help conserve and top up energy.
- They are good for our mood and well-being.
- Importance of a work / life balance.



# Getting Back into Work

## Keep in touch with your work place

- Regular emails and meetings whilst you are on long-term sick can be helpful to reduce anxieties.

## Phased return

- This may be longer than a standard phased return – it will be essential to discuss a realistic phased return with your manager.

## Fit notes

- Approach your GP for a fit note if you have been off work for longer than 7 days.
- These can be extended if required by your GP so keep them up to date with your progress and recovery.

## Simulating work tasks at home

- Start getting up at the usual time you would for work.
- Use your laptop occasionally through the day, to acclimatise to computer use again.

# Sources of Support

## Access to Work

- Can complete an assessment to help you get or stay in work.
- They can offer grants to pay for practical support with work, e.g. pay for taxis to reduce commuting demand, adapted chairs / screens.
- [www.gov.uk/access-to-work](http://www.gov.uk/access-to-work).

## Refer to Occupational Health

- Most organisations have their own occupational health departments.
- An assessment can help in identifying support for you in your work place.
- If your manager has not yet referred you for an occupational health assessment, **it is within your rights to ask for one.**

# Sources of Support Continued...

## Support from a work coach via the job centre

- Support to find work if you are seeking job opportunities.
- Building your skills for employment.
- Helping with interviewing coaching and confidence building.
- <https://www.jobcentreguide.co.uk/jobcentre-plus-guide/34/about-disability-employment-advisors>.
- <https://www.gov.uk/work-health-programme>.

## Health adjustment passport

- Supports you to identify support and changes in your work place.
- Helps with communication about adjustments and in-work support.
- [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/1094407/health-adjustment-passport.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1094407/health-adjustment-passport.pdf).

# Useful Links

<https://meassociation.org.uk/literature/items/employment-issues>

An essential guide that features: employment law, returning or continuing to work as a disabled person, reasonable adjustments, sickness absence, leaving work due to ill health, national insurance, benefits, pensions, early retirement, reasonable adjustments, termination of employment, and unfair dismissal.

<https://www.actionforme.org.uk/support-others/employers/>

This website is a source of key information for employers or colleagues of people living with ME.

<https://www.acas.org.uk/>

This website provides impartial advice to both employee and employer on work place rights, rules and best practices.