

Fatigue Management

Differences Between Mental Fatigue, Brain Fog, and Mental Burnout



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What Is Mental Fatigue?

Just like the body can become physically fatigued after intense exercise, rigorous mental exhaustion and stress can cause mental fatigue. This occurs when you're persistently overwhelmed without time for adequate rest and restoration, which leads to cognitive fatigue. You may find it difficult to problem-solve, focus on specific tasks, or make executive decisions. Likewise, you might struggle with the pervasive feeling that your brain is exhausted or overworked. Unlike other mental health struggles, mental exhaustion is when your brain operates at lower levels due to ongoing, unmanaged stress. Once you take a substantive break and incorporate regular rest into your life, the mental exhaustion typically goes away as well.

Mental Fatigue v. Brain Fog

The term "brain fog" refers to a general state of confusion and forgetfulness. Brain fog can be a side effect of mental fatigue. Like mental fatigue, it often results from high levels of stress, working too much, and a lack of sleep. However, brain fog may also emerge from other medical causes, such as pregnancy, cancer, diabetes, dehydration, and autoimmune disorders.

It may be more helpful to recognize that brain fog or a tired brain often coincides with mental fatigue. However, mental fatigue is a cluster of psychological and physical symptoms associated with feeling mentally exhausted.



Mental Fatigue v. Mental Burnout

Mental fatigue can be temporary and situational. For example, a college student often feels depleted and completely drained after finals week. Or an accountant might experience mental fatigue during tax season. Usually, relief occurs after the identified stressor passes.

Mental burnout, on the other hand, tends to be more insidious, chronic, and damaging. Burnout can result in extreme apathy, pessimism, and isolation. In addition, it may coincide with worsening depression, anxiety, or substance use disorder symptoms.



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