Fighting Back Against MS Brain Fog

by LIBBY SELINSKY

5 Ways to Combat Cognitive Fatigue

Cognitive fatigue, also known as brain fog, is one of the most common symptoms people with multiple sclerosis face. It can be your biggest foe as you try your hardest to face this disease and move forward.

I struggle with cognitive fatigue on a regular basis. There are times when it feels like a daily challenge to remain alert and focused. I struggle most with my mental absence during family time. I become unfocussed, forget people's names and struggle to remember basic words that would normally roll off my tongue without effort. Sometimes I zone out and then realize that I am not listening to the person that I am talking to.

Eventually, I will fall asleep. I can fall asleep anywhere, which is embarrassing, but mostly I run out of energy reserves at home. I hate sleeping through countless evenings when I could be awake and interacting with my son and husband. Sometimes I feel like I am sleeping the time away. I feel like I am going to wake up one of these days and my son will be grown and out on his own. I get depressed when I think of all the time I've lost.

So how do we combat MS brain fog? What can we do to harness and enjoy as much time as possible? How do we make sure that we are present and creating memories with the people we love?

The answer is not simple. The answer takes real, deep digging into your life for answers. It takes time to build your focus and to gain your mental traction, but it is very possible. The best part is that it is very much under your control.

1. Reduce and Manage Stress

Lets begin with stress. Stress is an enormous burden on your cognitive energy. Finding ways to reduce your stress in as many directions as possible will pay of huge in terms of restoring your homeostasis.

You must de-stress. Get rid of all the burdensome issues one by one. Look at your mindset. Take stock of the way that you interact with your life and the people in it. If you can unload a weight of stress you have been carrying, do it and do it now!

Of course, it isn't possible to get rid of all the things that stress you in this world. This is something that we all need to understand and acknowledge. It is your responsibility to learn coping mechanisms to deal with the stresses that you know you are going to regularly encounter in your life. These coping mechanisms can be self regulated and used as tools to carry around with you as you move through your world.

2. Exercise

One of my favorite coping mechanisms is exercise. I love getting out and going for a jog or riding my bike on one of the many trails we have near my home. Exercise works wonders for your emotional wellbeing. When I am

really exerting myself the world falls away and I become singularly focused on the task at hand. My mind enjoys the respite and gobbles up all of the wonderful chemicals that exercising produces.

When you exercise you are treating your body right, making yourself a priority, and giving your mind time to go into autopilot. Exercise does amazing things to your brain and while it sounds counterintuitive that exercise would have a positive influence on cognitive and physical fatigue; it is by all means true.

Exercise, exercise, exercise… Find yourself something active that you love to do and find a way to do it on a regular basis.

3. Keep a Regular Schedule

Next up, keep a regular schedule. Know what you have coming ahead of you in each day and plan breaks and meals to ensure that you don't find yourself drained too early in your day. If I know that I have to wake up at 5am to hop on an airplane, I am going to make sure that I have a solid break by 10am to recharge and relax. Pushing through till a lunch break at noon is going to leave me struggling to stay awake by 2pm.

Planning your day properly can work wonders for your psyche! Think about it, if you keep a solid schedule based on your needs then you will find yourself with more energy on a regular basis. Letting your time management run amuck has a cumulative affect on your energy reserves. The inverse is also true. Planning ahead and giving yourself space to exist in your world has a positive cumulative affect and your happiness levels increase with your ability to enjoy your whole day, everyday.

4. Eat Well

Yes, I harp on about this point all the time. It doesn't make it any less true. A diet filled with all kinds of veggies, healthy oils and low fat meats will help your body to heal and remain on the right track.

Your body knows when you have been feeding it wrong. People with MS are highly sensitive to changes in their body condition. We can feel the effects of our food much more quickly and, if we pay attention, this can be of a strong benefit to us.

I used to despise the fact that my energy would drain and my brain would stop functioning when I became too hungry. Now I just understand that I shouldn't be putting my body through stress. I need to care for myself at all times. Really though, isn't there something great about the fact that we are no longer allowed to ignore our needs and comfort?

5. Sleep Well

Finally, get some sleep! Sleep is essential to our survival. I have never really been that great at sleeping; it is my biggest struggle. I love to stay up late at night and I always wake up very early. I used to pummel through life on less than five hours of sleep a night and have never been very comfortable relaxing for so many hours in a row.

Again, MS strolled on into my world and decided to dictate the way I should live my life. It is standing there with a clipboard, every night, logging the minutes that I slumber. I have to sleep to the requirements of my body now or I will not be a functional person the next day. And like everything else, sleep is cumulative now. If I miss for too many nights in a row then I will be made to pay for my transgression. If I get enough sleep, day after day, then I will be more alert and functional. Life seems easier and happier.

Cognitive fatigue is ugly. It is powerful. It is not your friend. But one thing I have learned in this life is that your enemies make you smarter. They make you better. They make you take stock of who you are in your world. If you play your cards right, they lead you to live a life of focused purpose.

Grab the power that you have and lead the life that you want to live. MS is your reminder to take good care of yourself and maintain your inner strength.