

“Why Do I Feel So Tired?”

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“I have so much free time these days and a list of projects a mile long – why can’t I get anything done?”

“My kids are doing online school and I’m working from home. I know that’s a lot, but it’s going well. I don’t understand this brain fog I have!”

“I’m actually doing fine. I’m working and enjoying my down time, so why do I feel so tired and overwhelmed?”

Anyone relate to these types of questions? If so, you may be experiencing what I will call *Pandemic Fatigue*. We all understand why people who are sick or have lost loved ones or jobs are stressing. But what about those who are seemingly doing well? Why so tired, “out-of-it,” or irritable? As knowledge can be powerful, a little understanding of what is going on in your brain and body right now might help you feel better.

Most of us have heard that our brain is divided into two halves, aptly called the left and right hemispheres. The left side of the brain is responsible for language, logic, and linear (sequential) functions. When someone asks you what you had for dinner and you see or hear the words, “Tuna melt and soup” in your head, that is a left side function. This is somewhat oversimplified, but for all practical purposes, it works just fine.

Then there is the picture of the tuna melt that pops into your head at the same time. This comes from the right side. The right hemisphere can be thought of as somatic (or, body-related), creative, and imaginative. The implications of this are far more impacting than it might seem at first. Let me explain.

Your brain, in some ways, is analogous to a vast set of highly detailed and trigger-based files filled with all your perceptions and experiences as well as a plethora of social rules. The brain uses these files to anticipate what is happening next. Think about it. When you get up in the morning and want your daily java fix, you make it from your bed to your kitchen rather quickly and without much (if any) conscious thought. Why?

The files are sorted and accessed by what I call the Executive Assistant (EA). The EA resides in the left side of the brain, right over and behind your left eye. In technical terms, we call this area the dorsal-lateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC). The EA/DLPFC is responsible for our awareness and our executive functions, such as planning, working memory, decision making, and all the bits and pieces that help us analyze and predict. When we head to the Keurig, it is because the EA has pulled the files and knows where to put your foot next.

That's cool... But, what about the right side of the brain?

Our right hemisphere is quite different from the left and has not been well explained to or understood by most people. We humans tend to prize the use of words and clear measurements to make ourselves feel safe and understood. When we say, "I'll believe it when I see it," I believe what we are really saying is, "If the EA can name it and quantify it, then it's a real thing." If we can't put something into words explain it, we are not as likely to believe it or take it seriously. However, we have all had the experience of "just knowing" something. We often refer to that as intuition.

There is another word that has helped me and that is: noesis. **Noesis** (or noetic knowing) is that deep understanding of the whole picture or situation that is usually a function of the right side. Imagery, non-verbal language, and many of our sensations can be considered right hemisphere functions – and, though we don't often think this way, in most cases, the right and the left side are both just about equally accurate. In fact, I would argue, your right brain can give you way more information than your left, if you learn how to pay attention to it.

"Ok. That is all very well and good and interesting," you say, "But, what does this have to do with Pandemic Fatigue?" Very good question.

When we wake up in the morning and the EA emerges from the fog of sleep these days, many of us do one of two things. We either start running a list of "to dos" or worries (left brain) or, we pick up our phones and start skimming through the seemingly endless drone of news about the coronavirus. Although we read words in the reports (left brain), we also see many images, watch many video clips, and hear a lot of tonal banter between people (right brain).

You see, you may be just fine. You have food, a house, can pay your bills, and are maybe even enjoying the downtime – but your right brain is overloaded with fearful thoughts and your brain as a whole cannot predict what is coming next. All a brain needs to engage in a good ‘ol freak out is uncertainty!

Your tiredness comes from an incredibly overactive brain wherein most of what’s going on in there is outside of our conscious awareness. Fatigue, soreness, stomach upset, and headaches can be a result. Brain fog comes from the types of neurotransmitters your brain is floating in. Many of us “flip our lids,” as Dr. Daniel Siegel would say. This means the emotion producing part of the brain loses contact with the logic and planning part of brain and we go on fight or flight autopilot.

The first thing you need to do right now is make peace with the fact that you will feel tense or even fearful many times in the coming weeks and months. As I write this, my stomach is upset because my husband has to return to work next week. No one is immune from this aspect of the coronavirus because there is uncertainty of some kind in everyone’s life right now. Some people handle uncertainty better than others, but if they’re paying attention, it’s likely they’ve noticed an increase in edginess or other physical symptoms. They have just minimized them or learned to deal with them.

The moral of this story is: There is absolutely nothing wrong with you if you feel tired, foggy, or overly irritable right now.

I can hear it now. “That’s great! But I don’t want to be tired, foggy, or irritable.”

I have good news and I have bad news. Let’s get the bad news out of the way. Science and psychology have not reached the place where we have learned how to directly and instantly communicate with the right side of the brain. That means, you gonna feel bad whether you want to or not – for a while. The good news is, your “feels” do not have to run the ship! If you have greater awareness and make a few changes, then over time, the combination of your healthy thoughts, behaviors, and environmental cues will reset your emotions and you will start to feel better. It takes work, but it is worthy work. Here are a few ideas.

Schedule Your Worry Time. Worries abound right now, there is no denying that. There are a lot of changes and more to come. It is important to have a plan of action as well as a

“Plan B” mentality. However, what is actually counterproductive is carrying your worries with you all day and into the night. Preoccupation with anxiety-provoking thoughts may cause you to skip meals, interrupt your sleep, and make your fuse short with others, among other nasty effects. It can be really helpful to train yourself to pick a time each day where you can sit, uninterrupted, and do your planning. This is easier said than done, so do not be afraid to use props and reminders. Keep a notepad with you at all times so if a worry pops into your brain you can write it down “to worry about later”. Choose your worry time for the next day at least an hour before bed. As you sleep, try to put your mind in pleasant places and write down any worries on your notepad (which is now on your bedside table). Set a reminder on your phone or in your day planner to choose your time – protect it, don’t schedule over it.

Finally, consider adding a couple reminders to your phone to:

Limit Right Brain Overload. Yes, I know. This is painful. It is best right now to limit your exposure to any emotion-inducing visual media – that includes highly dramatic news, television programs, visual social media, or video games. Choose one or two reputable and reliable news media sources and watch only once or twice a day. Maybe choose cooking shows over dramatic soap operas if they fire you up. Whatever you do, pay attention to the reactions in your mood and body and tailor your intake of media accordingly.

Take Lots of Mental & Physical Breaks. This speaks for itself but let me just say – if you can make twenty widgets in a day usually, you are going to do well to make ten right now. Give yourself permission to get more rest than usual.

Collect Happiness. This is one of my favorite things. We have all heard the value of gratitude, say writing three things every day that made you happy or grateful. Gratitude has wonderful medicinal and psychologically positive effects. However, what if life feels pretty terrible right now and you cannot think of three things? Or, things that usually make you happy don’t right now? What then? Are we supposed to be thankful for dreadful things? In a way, yes... but that’s another blog. For now – if you come to the end of a day and cannot think of three things that made you grateful, then come up with three things you can add to your day tomorrow to evoke that particular feeling. Stop leaving it up to chance or others to make you happy – it’s *your* job. Go get it. Then, you not only get the happiness, you gain the sense of accomplishment (and a good dose of dopamine as well)!

There you have it. You are normal, and it is okay not to feel okay right now. Move slowly. Breathe. Consider your words before you say them. If, however, you are in dire need and cannot manage on your own, please reach out to others for help. Call your doctor, your therapist, or even The Center for advice. You are not alone. You are a family member in the human race, and you matter. Take good care of you!

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