

“Fatigue is a constant conversation... just around planning each day”: managing fatigue after an Acquired Brain Injury.

LSA funds allowed us to investigate this important query concerning one of the most reported symptoms following a brain injury. We wanted to understand what it is like for someone to experience fatigue as part of their brain injury to support us to shape our interventions; how it affects their chosen lifestyle and what adaptations they need to make. We also wanted to investigate whether Occupational Therapy could make a difference, and how should the therapy be provided.

We compared the outcomes between usual care (education within Occupational Therapy one to one sessions) and group-based education about fatigue provided by an Occupational Therapist in an inpatient brain injury rehabilitation unit. The results indicated that the group sessions were as effective as one to one sessions when we measured acquisition of knowledge about managing their fatigue.

The interviews that were subsequently undertaken with people who received the group based intervention provided further information: they suggested that general information about fatigue and management strategies could happen successfully in a group, but they preferred an individual follow-up session to discuss their very specific issues.

The interviews also provided some quite dramatic insights into what it is like to experience fatigue after an acquired brain injury, including how fatigue changes who you are..... (*This is not what I’m used to being. It is very difficult to be something different.....(person with a brain injury)*).

In addition, participants found it hard to understand whether the fatigue was related to their brain injury. Some people with brain injury related fatigue felt confused that they could cope with being very physically active and go for a long walk which is an automatic activity, but become exhausted after a few minutes when they need to think and work out how to attach a nozzle to a hose.

All participants reported that they could improve their coping by understanding their individual pattern of fatigue and adapting their life accordingly. One person shared:

.....fatigue is a constant conversation... just around planning each day. It is important that it does continue after the [fatigue education] sessions..... So when we were with your cousin, you know not talking as much. So they were able to change the way they interacted with her. I think that was the big part. (partner of person with fatigue after a brain injury).

This research taught us

1. Fatigue after an acquired brain injury (ABI) is not well recognised or understood by patients.
2. Early education and therapy regarding fatigue after ABI should be provided to inpatients undertaking rehabilitation.
3. Fatigue education is effective when provided in a group.
4. At least one individual therapy session should be provided in addition to attendance at the group sessions to address each patient’s specific issues.

Research Team

Dr Maggie Killington. Research Coordinator SA Brain Injury Rehabilitation Services

Michael Snigg. Senior Occupational Therapist SA Brain Injury Rehabilitation Services