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17 March 2020

The reason I started these blogs was to share both my personal and professional experience on life with a big focus on Cancer. We wanted to bring a series of educational blogs to our 5k Your Way, Move Against Cancer community to help support you when living with and beyond cancer.

This post is going to be all about Cancer related Fatigue. I am going to deep dive into the topic to help you get a better understanding for it. I was never told that I might experience cancer related fatigue in my recovery from cancer, I was never told what it was or why it happened, and I never knew how to self-manage it. I've struggled with it personally however I am now able to self-manage it by understanding exactly what it is, understanding how it affects me and most importantly working on self-management tools so I am in control of it.



So, let's talk about it. Let's talk about what it actually is. Let's talk about how it can make you or someone else feel and let's talk about what you can do about it.



What we need to understand first is that Cancer Related Fatigue isn't 'JUST' tiredness. It is something a lot of people struggle with and struggle to explain what it is. In order to understand how to deal with it, it's important to understand everything about it if you are going through treatment yourself or you know someone who has been diagnosed with cancer.

It can be very hard to explain to family/friends and even harder to justify why you are feeling this way. It can be one of the most distressing side effects of a cancer diagnosis and it can have a very negative effect on your quality of life. It can last from a few months to years after you have finished treatment and often people really struggle to understand how they can self-manage it. Cancer related fatigue is something I have had to deal with myself over the last 5 years.

People don't talk enough about cancer related fatigue. So, let's start here;

What is Cancer Related Fatigue and what is it caused by?

Cancer related fatigue is one of the most common side effects of cancer and its treatment. It is an excessive whole-body tiredness, and a constant lack of energy. Usually when you are tired a good night's sleep can solve this tiredness and leaves you feeling better again in the morning. This doesn't happen with Cancer related Fatigue. Cancer related fatigue usually gets better when treatment ends however it can be chronic and last for years. Every single person we work who has been diagnosed with cancer has experienced cancer related fatigue. Everyone we have worked with has little understanding of what it is and struggling to understand how they manage it. It can prevent someone carrying out even the simplest of daily tasks and can have a huge impact on your overall quality of life. According to Macmillan 9 out of 10 people (90%) suffer from some form of fatigue and it can affect people very differently.

Why do I get cancer related fatigue? What might it be caused by?

Cancer related fatigue may be caused by a number of different factors. Below I have highlighted some of the common things that can cause CRF. When you have a read of the below make a list of some of the things that you feel are currently affecting you. This process will help when you come to look at the interventions as it will help you identify the factors that you can't currently control and the factors that you can control.

The common causes;

Cancer - When I was diagnosed with cancer, I could feel my body started to shut down. The day before I started treatment, I felt like I could of slept every hour of the day. I felt like this during treatment as well. Cancer and its treatment can change normal protein and hormone levels that are linked to anti-inflammatory processes that can cause fatigue. Cancer cells compete with normal cells for nutrients and often at the expense of normal cell growth. Tiredness, weight loss and a decreased appetite can all be common side effects.

Treatment and medication - Treatment destroys cells both cancer cells and healthy cells. All of the body's energy is directed towards destroying cells during this process. Treatments including chemotherapy, radiotherapy, hormonal therapy, targeted therapies and surgery can contribute to developing cancer related fatigue. CRF usually improves when you have finished treatment but can sometimes be a long-term problem. I have found mine has got better with time. It has improved even more now I have more control and I am working on the self-management interventions. There are still things I struggle to do such as have three busy weekends in a row. If I do this, I usually get run down or pick up an illness of some sort. This wouldn't have affected me before I had cancer so it's still a balancing act to enable me to improve my quality of life.

Anemia - Anemia is a common side effect of treatment. Red blood cells carry oxygen to fuel all the cells in the body. Too few red blood cells mean not enough oxygen to meet the body's needs. If this level is really low, you may have a blood transfusion. Your red blood cell levels should increase the further away from treatment you go but make sure you keep checking your levels when you attend your follow up appointments. It's often a good idea to keep a record of these yourself. If these levels continue to be low, make sure your consultant/health professional is following this up as this is a big factor that could be making you feel fatigued.

Low Vitamin D levels - Low Vitamin D levels can contribute to fatigue. Make sure you get your consultant to check these at your next blood test/follow up appointment.

Side Effects of treatment - Vomiting, pain, nausea, insomnia and changes in mood can all contribute to cancer related fatigue.

Chronic Pain - Research shows that chronic, severe pain can cause fatigue. When you experience chronic pain you are less active, you can eat less and experience low mood. All of these factors contribute to fatigue.

Experience of the cancer journey - The experience of going through a cancer diagnosis and treatment can not only impact you physically but also emotionally. People often suffer from anger, anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress. People can develop these during treatment but also years after. It is normal to feel some or all of these emotions but it's also important that you seek help if you are experiencing any of the above.



I didn't talk about it for a while but I now know that I experienced post-traumatic stress in the years after I finished treatment. Post-traumatic stress isn't something that's often associated with a cancer diagnosis however we are seeing it more and more. What you experience when you are diagnosed with cancer is something no one can ever prepare you for. I had nightmares and flashbacks on a daily basis. These flashbacks were vivid and intense, and I wasn't prepared for this emotional stress either. People often expect you to finish treatment and then move on. It doesn't work like that. Having cancer is an extremely traumatic experience and can leave you with both physical and mental scars. These emotional aspects affect our physical well-being and can have a huge impact on our quality of life.

MOVING more is a key intervention to help manage fatigue. More about this in my next post.



Inactivity - Decreased fitness levels, muscle wastage and sedentary lifestyles are some of the biggest factors related to cancer related fatigue. I can completely understand why people don't want to exercise during treatment and in recovery. I couldn't move out of a

hospital bed for 5 days and when I finished my first 6 week of inpatient treatment I was told by a consultant I wouldn't be running a year post chemotherapy. We often aren't given the right advice or appropriate guidance to help us consider exercise as an option or how to exercise safely. Hopefully as the Founder of MOVE charity and a level 4 cancer rehab trainer I can help educate around the benefits of moving more during and after treatment and also how to do this safely.

Dehydration - Dehydration is a common cause of fatigue. Everything in the human body is made up of fluid. Dehydration is not having enough water in the body or enough in the places that need it. We should be aiming to drink between 2-3 litres of water per day. More about how to keep on top of this in my next blog.

Nutrition choices - In order for your body to work effectively, to recover and to give you enough energy you need to fuel it with the right and appropriate amount of food to give you enough energy. Eating real fresh food can help our mental well-being as well as our physical health and help to balance energy levels throughout the day.

Above I have highlighted the key factors that can contribute to cancer related fatigue. Hopefully this first step has helped you gain a better understanding of CRF so you can take the first step in taking back control.

In my next blog I am going to be deep diving into self-management interventions that should help you take back control.

Thank you for reading.

Gemma Hillier-Moses

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