

Toolbox Talk

Mental vs Physical Fatigue



Time: 15 minutes

Objective: To help workers understand the difference between physical and mental fatigue, recognise when tiredness may be affecting concentration and safety and know what practical steps can help.

Think about the last few hours of a long working day. You've read the same drawing twice. You've walked back to the van because you've forgotten something. Someone gives you an instruction and a minute later you're trying to remember exactly what they said. Your body might feel fine but your head has had enough. Most of us recognise physical fatigue. Our backs ache, our legs feel heavy and we know when we've pushed ourselves physically. Mental fatigue can be harder to spot. You can look completely fine while your concentration, reactions and decision-making are starting to slow down. On a construction site, that's something worth paying attention to.

Why It Matters

Think about how much information we process during an ordinary working day. We're reading drawings, measuring, planning work, remembering instructions, solving problems, communicating with other trades, watching for hazards and constantly adjusting when something changes. Then add early starts, travelling, noise, interruptions, deadlines and the pressure of getting the job finished.

Eventually, your head can become tired in the same way your body does. When that happens, straightforward tasks can take more effort. You might find yourself working on autopilot or taking longer to process what's happening around you. That's particularly important when you're driving, working at height, operating machinery, using power tools or carrying out anything where a small mistake could have serious consequences.

Mental fatigue doesn't necessarily mean somebody has a mental health problem. Sometimes your brain is simply overloaded and needs a chance to recover. Recognising that early can help you slow down before tiredness turns into a mistake.



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Signs To Look Out For

Mental fatigue can look different from person to person but there are some common signs. You might notice yourself:

- Reading something several times before it sinks in.
- Forgetting tools, materials or instructions.
- Losing track of what you're doing halfway through a task.
- Making simple mistakes that aren't normally like you.
- Becoming easily distracted by noise or conversations.
- Taking longer to make straightforward decisions.
- Feeling unusually impatient or frustrated.
- Zoning out during a briefing or conversation.
- Working on autopilot rather than properly thinking through the job.

You might notice similar things in someone working alongside you. Perhaps they're repeating mistakes, forgetting what they've just been told or struggling with something they'd normally do without thinking. The important thing isn't to diagnose somebody. It's simply to recognise when you or someone around you might not be fully switched on.

What Can Help

If you notice your concentration starting to drop, the first thing to do is acknowledge it rather than trying to push through without thinking. Take a proper break if you can. Even five or ten minutes away from the task can give your head a chance to reset. If you're about to start something safety-critical, slow yourself down. Stop for a few seconds and think through what you're doing. Check the equipment, check the environment and make sure you've understood the task properly before carrying on. If someone gives you an important instruction and your head feels overloaded, ask them to repeat it.



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There's nothing wrong with saying, "Give me that again, mate." It's better to check than pretend you've understood and get it wrong.

Food and water matter too. Missing lunch, not drinking enough or trying to get through the afternoon on energy drinks and caffeine isn't going to help your concentration. Think about your workload as well. If you've spent hours doing something that requires constant concentration, switching tasks or taking a short break can sometimes help.

Most importantly, if you're so mentally tired that you don't feel safe carrying out the task in front of you, say something. Five minutes spent stopping, checking or asking for help is better than dealing with the consequences of a mistake.

Discussion Questions

- What are the first signs you notice when your concentration starts dropping?
- Which jobs on site become more dangerous when someone is mentally fatigued?
- What can we do as a team when we notice someone isn't fully switched on?

Takeaway Message

Physical fatigue tells us when our body needs a rest. Mental fatigue tells us when our concentration and decision-making need one too. Being tired isn't always about aching muscles. Sometimes it's forgetting simple things, struggling to focus or realising you're working on autopilot. Recognising those signs isn't weakness. It's part of working safely.



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Action

At some point today, especially later in the shift, check where your concentration is. If you're fully switched on, carry on. If your head is starting to wander, slow down, reset and take an extra few seconds before the next task and if you notice someone else making unusual mistakes or struggling to focus, check in with them. Sometimes saying, "Mate, you seem knackered, you alright?" is all it takes to make someone stop and realise they need a moment.

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