

FATIGUE AND LEISURE

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IT has been said that this is the Age of Anxiety. As we advance in knowledge, as we develop culturally, and as our civilization evolves, we are beset by new fears and new dangers. Almost every day brings with it something new for us to worry about. We hear of wars and rumors of wars, and of missiles and sputniks hurtling around high overhead. We listen to talk of atom bombs and hydrogen bombs that can destroy us altogether. We have perhaps, too much power, and too little judgment to enable us to control that power. As a result of our fears, we seek various panaceas to make living less frightening and more satisfying. In the United States one in ten of us receives psychiatric help at some time during his life, and an even greater proportion of us take tranquilizers or sedatives from time to time to find peace.

Our search for peace of mind is so great that books on this subject become best sellers. Many of us use alcohol moderately as a socially acceptable tranquilizer, but millions of Americans are alcoholics. Each year for 20,000 of us the struggle for balanced living becomes unendurable, and suicide becomes the final effort; many more than this number attempt to commit suicide. It has been said that we all are neurotic—with the possible exception, of course, of a few psychiatrists—and indeed, if one is not neurotic, then one is dull—out of fashion. “Normality,” someone has said, “is a species of dullness.” In any event, we all, neurotic or normal, react to physical and mental stress with fatigue, and when anxiety or fear is involved, these emotions seem to act as catalysts and to intensify the fatigue.

Fatigue

Fatigue, in response to stress, is not a phenomenon restricted to this Age of Anxiety. Fossils of human bones, taken from the Nile Valley, some of which are about 350,000 years old, show among other things that diseases such as osteoarthritis and arteriosclerosis had been relatively common diseases.¹ This evidence suggests that we may not be entirely right in attributing such disease processes to the strain and stress of present-day living. Indeed, many of the stresses of everyday living are much the same today as they have always been. One of the oldest writings in the world when translated, states: “Alas, times are not what they used to be. Children no longer obey their parents.”²

What is fatigue? Little is written about fatigue, yet all of us are familiar with the phenomenon, for we frequently experience it. Some say it is *all* in our minds;

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and they are almost right, for *most* of it is.

Physical fatigue. Physical fatigue may result from excessive physical exertion, especially when we are not used to exerting ourselves physically. Activities such as moving furniture, waxing the car, mowing the lawn, walking five miles before breakfast, digging in the vegetable garden, or carrying out the garbage, may cause us to feel physically fatigued. This is not a pathologic state; it is both healthy and desirable. No anxiety or fear is associated with it. It results in part from physiologic alterations of the muscles, and from the accumulation of lactic acid and other metabolites. Such fatigue one can readily dispel by taking a warm bath, massaging the tired muscles, and by obtaining some relaxation, rest, and sleep.

The fatigue that results from the stress of conditions such as anemia, tuberculosis, fever from any cause, diabetes mellitus, myxedema, and hepatitis, is a symptom of disease, and may be the first symptom of some diseases. When one is fearful or anxious, the fatigue experienced is much greater than when one is relaxed. This type of fatigue from the stress of disease, however, is not within the scope of this paper.

Mental or emotional fatigue. The type of fatigue we are particularly interested in is mental or emotional fatigue, which comes from mental or emotional stress. The stress may be acute or chronic.

Acute emotional stress is associated with fear. The frightening stimulus creates mental tension and apprehension, which cause the body's defenses to become mobilized for action—the so-called fight or flight reaction will occur, depending upon the nature of the stimulus. When the threatening stimulus is a mouse, the fight response may follow; when it is a circus tiger that has escaped, the most appropriate response may be flight. Whenever some kind of action is taken which is an appropriate solution to the fear stimulus, there is relief from tension. When no action is taken, or when the fear stimulus persists and inappropriate action is taken, the feelings of tension and apprehension also persist and mount, resulting in fatigue. This sequence explains why an expectant father may suffer so much more than the expectant mother at the time of her delivery. She produces a baby, and this appropriate action relieves her tension. He is limited to pacing the corridor floor, to smoking innumerable cigarettes or to biting his fingernails, which are very exhausting activities.

The inability to take appropriate action in response to fear stimuli is well known to soldiers in battle, and they may temporarily break down mentally from tension and fatigue. This is called "combat fatigue." A similar state occurs in airmen under stress; it is called "flying fatigue." Disaster victims, who are stunned by a mass of threatening stimuli, experience exhaustion or disaster fatigue. Similarly, examinees suffer from examination fatigue. When physical fatigue is concurrent with mental stress, the exhaustion is more extreme than when it is absent. A person exposed to frightening and threatening stimuli becomes tense,

anxious, and apprehensive. He is sensitive to noise; he feels weak; he trembles; he is irritable; he loses emotional control and bursts into tears easily; and he feels exhausted. The treatment for this state comprises the removal of the person from the stressful situation, and the provision of adequate rest and sleep, and thereafter his prompt return to some useful physical activity.

Chronic emotional stress may cause fatigue; it results from prolonged unresolved internal conflict and tension, such as that which occurs in anxiety states and other psychoneuroses. The source of danger lies within the person himself—that is, in the unconscious part of his mind. A person's mind may be likened to a pool of water, the surface of the water representing consciousness. Below the surface lie the various depths of the unconscious part of the mind. Thoughts or ideas that are shameful, undesirable, or disgusting, are repressed; to use a familiar expression, "we put them out of our minds," but actually, we only put them out of the conscious parts of our minds. In the analogy of the pool of water, repressed ideas are like inflated rubber balls that we try to keep submerged. Because of their buoyancy, they constantly seek access to the surface of the water, and we have to use mental energy to hold them down. The effort to suppress unwelcome thoughts, is the source of the fatigue of the psychoneurotic patient. In order to keep these internal conflicts submerged, mental energy is consumed, and exhaustion results. The term "neurasthenia" has been used to describe this type of nervous exhaustion. It was introduced into American psychiatry in 1869 by Beard³ to whom we should all be grateful, because to say: "I suffer from neurasthenia," sounds so much more dignified than to say "Gee, I'm pooped." According to Masserman,⁴ Freud also used the term, which makes it even more acceptable. He considered neurasthenia a symptom resulting from sexual energy that could not be satisfactorily expressed.

The symptoms of neurasthenia are well known, some of which are: lack of energy, fatigability, difficulty in concentrating, ergophobia (fear of work), poor appetite, ennui, and irritability. Physically, the blood pressure is low, the pulse rate is variable, the bowels are irregular, and there may be low back pain, headaches, dizziness, diminished sexual potency.

The "drooping-lily syndrome" is a variant of neurasthenia. An example familiar to all, is that of the social dilettante who arises at noon, consumes several martinis before a modest lunch, is then chauffeur-driven to the beauty parlor, is beautified for an hour or two, is driven home and takes a luxurious nap to recover from the day's exertions. She arises just before dinner and announces to her overworked husband: "My dear, I've had a dreadful day! I'm just *exhausted*."

Neurasthenia may result from prolonged intense concentrated effort on a project, with resultant tension, irritability, and exhaustion, and an inability to relax after the project has been completed. (Psychiatrists experience this effect at the end of each day of listening to patients and thinking about their problems.)

Vanbrugh,⁵ in the seventeenth century, said "Thinking, to me, is the greatest fatigue in the world."

A person who is mentally fatigued may accentuate his fatigue by: irregularity of meals, with consequent lowering of the blood sugar concentration; smoking excessively, with resultant mild carbon monoxide poisoning; having an uninteresting or undemanding job or being bored; getting insufficient sleep; or harboring fear for a prolonged period. Many of these factors pertain to the hard-worked medical resident, and cause what I call "residents' fatigue"—a clinical entity that is well-known, especially among residents.

There is, perhaps, one misconception that may be clarified at this point. It is believed by some that overwork may cause neurasthenic fatigue. I do not believe that overwork causes neurasthenia or leads to nervous breakdown, unless excessive work is utilized as a neurotic defense to prevent unconscious tensions from becoming conscious. One overworked businessman, who finally was hospitalized because his excessive activity led to a state of exhaustion, maintained a busy schedule within the confines of the hospital, and was constantly trying to call his office and continue his business. He finally had to be restrained from such activities. This limitation irritated him, and he became acutely anxious, querying: "But Doc, can't you see that *I've just got to keep working?*"

Leisure

In considering the treatment of mental fatigue, I want to say a few things about leisure, because the most effective prevention of mental fatigue is the appropriate utilization of leisure.

First let us see how we use leisure and how we relax nowadays. It is my belief that some of our greatest satisfactions are derived from re-enacting experiences that became enjoyable to us early in the course of our development, both physically and culturally. For example, some of us are still on the bottle, although the content is different; the content that we now enjoy is that which makes us less inhibited, less anxious, and more like children—not more like adults. We like to suck objects and to chew things: such as gum, cigars, pipe stems. Some of us like to soak in a hot bath to the accompaniment of soft, rhythmic music. If we were to put out the lights and have food piped in, we would be simulating very closely, the blissful intrauterine existence of the fetus that knows no anxiety, danger, or fatigue. Some of us like to abandon our superb timesaving electric and electronic cooking devices, which in this country are unsurpassed in excellence, and revert to the more primitive technic of throwing onto a pile of hot charcoal a piece of raw meat, the charred remains of which we proceed to devour in some dark corner that is illumined only by smoky, drippy candles. Should we wish to, at the flick of a switch we could have a thousand lumens of light, and tastily

well-cooked meat. And yet, charcoal broiling is a sensible activity. Each one of us has something of the child in him, and it is gratifying to be a child again, to enjoy these developmental and primitive pleasures, and to escape momentarily from the pressures of our adult responsibilities as civilized citizens. "We look before and after; we pine for what is not."⁵

When a person can relax in the ways described, neurasthenic or mental fatigue is not likely to develop. But if mental fatigue has developed, these suggestions may be helpful. As has been mentioned, mental fatigue results from internal conflict and from tension in situations in which, for one reason or another, appropriate action cannot be taken. Now, appropriate action is not taking a few drinks and then going to bed to try to sleep, for if you are mentally fatigued you probably will not be able to sleep.

Mental fatigue will be alleviated, first by planned diversional activities that are as remote from the person's occupational activities as possible. Thus, physical activity can cause a release of tension and serve as a safety valve. Working off tensions in a gymnasium, on the squash court, or in a swimming pool, or by skating, walking the dog, or in a game of golf, are all recreational activities; they "re-create" the individual by alleviating his tensions.

Secondly, diversional entertainment that provides laughter can similarly relieve mental fatigue. Laughter is an excellent way of relieving tension, and an exhausted person with a good sense of humor has a distinct advantage over the humorless person.

Thirdly, adequate rest is extremely important. Rest enables both body and mind to recuperate in preparation for the stresses of the coming day. We all know how irritable some people are after a 'bad night.' We know they have had a bad night before they tell us. When mental fatigue in the otherwise asymptomatic person interferes with sleep, then I believe that sedation is appropriate therapy.

And perhaps, fourthly, living in a restful and peaceful environment is worthy of mention. It is difficult to relax when there is constant chatter from children, and sound from television, radio, pets, and other sources. It may seem trite to mention, but sometimes it is not easy to obtain a peaceful environment.

Conclusion

Thus, our minds help us to adjust to the tensions that arise from within and from without, and when fatigue results from unresolved tension we can help ourselves through our effective utilization of leisure.

"What we have not yet learned is . . . how to make our leisure as satisfying, honorable and as creative a part of our lives as work."⁶

⁵*From Percy Bysshe Shelley's "To a Skylark."*

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