

How to start exercising when you have fatigue

Webinar Q&A Capture

Question: Can I integrate adding weights at the same time as I start a walking programme?

Answer: I would always recommend bringing one thing in at a time. Otherwise, if you realise that things aren't going so well, it's difficult to tell which of them your system isn't coping so well with. Also, given the fact that you should be starting small and not increasing your baseline too much at first, you'd have to do each of them at such small amounts that it really doesn't feel terribly satisfying!

My guidance is always to work on increasing one thing at a time. So perhaps get your walking to a certain level, pause it there (although continue to do it at that level on your 'exercise days') and start to bring in the weights as a new activity on some of your exercise days. Patience is key!

Question: I've been managing to walk and swim now for a few months, and have got up to a good 45 minutes. But I can't walk uphill – even for short times. Should I use the suggested '1 minute every four days' type approach to try and get that up?

Answer: First of all, well done on getting up to that level! But it does sound as though your system needs the right amount of gentle encouragement to get used to being pushed in that slightly different way.

Some people know they have some sort of respiratory issue as a result of an initial viral infection, in which case it's important to get this resolved. But even if you didn't have a known respiratory difficulty, prolonged bouts of inactivity can lead to your 'breathing muscles' weakening and it can be helpful to work on strengthening them again.

I mentioned a wonderful Breathwork Physio called Kelly. Here are her details if anyone reading this feels this might be a helpful thing to work on. She doesn't appear to need many sessions with you, often just one or two: <https://www.thebreathingpt.co.uk/>

If that all gets checked out and you know you don't have any issues, then yes using my 'every 4th day' approach to gently increase your hill walking is a sensible approach.

Question: At what stage does it count as PEM? I often get muscle soreness after doing any sort of exercise...is that PEM or is it OK?

Answer: Great question, such a tricky thing to spot! And it's difficult to give a specific definitive answer of course – we're talking about sensations and feelings here, which are so personal to everyone. However... what I will say is that PEM is a very defined type of feeling usually. It's a particularly horrible way to feel, far more than just discomfort for many people. Without 're feeling' it, think back to times in the past when PEM was quite a feature of your journey, and remember how that felt. It's likely it was a horrid mix of various different physical sensations. Use that information to be able to tell if what you're feeling now is PEM or just your body feeling the effects of being used in ways it hasn't been used for a while.

I'm not an expert physio therapist, so please do reach out to one if you want to get any of the advice I've given today checked over for you personally. But it's my understanding that pushing through when you have muscle soreness from using them in new ways, isn't usually a good idea anyway. So, if you experience considerable discomfort, it's probably best to pause a bit and let that settle before you go again.

Question: I haven't heard about PEM before but it completely resonates. Can you say a bit more about what it is, what's known about it?

Answer: PEM stands for 'Post Exertional Malaise' and it's a very common symptom for those with fatigue – indeed it's one of the markers that medical practitioners look for when diagnosing someone with a form of chronic fatigue (because, of course, there are no actual tests for fatigue). It's sometimes called 'Delayed Onset Fatigue', but it seems more common to call it PEM these days.

It stems from one of the frustrating elements of a fatigue journey: that you don't actually know at the time that you're overdoing it. You feel ok at the time, whatever you're doing feels completely manageable – enjoyable, even, depending on what that thing is! BUT you realise later, often either 24 or 48 hours later, that you've pushed your system too much and it brings on a flare of symptoms (or, if you're really unlucky, a full 'crash'). Most people have a defined PEM pattern, often one day or two days later. Sometimes three.

The best thing to do is get to know your baseline. Work out your current energy levels and figure out how you can craft each day so that it fits within those levels – no matter what the type of day you need to have. Get familiar with how much of what sorts of activities you can do in a day to stay within that level. If you want to go for a walk (and it's manageable for you at present) great...but that will mean it has to come out of your energy store for that day and you might need to dial back on a few other things. It's all about balance. But sticking to this level consistently, and only increasing your baseline by small amounts when you're ready, is how to best avoid PEM.

One final thing – I've coined the phrase 'Cumulative Onset Fatigue' and have written a blog about it. You might find it of interest: <https://www.pamelarose.co.uk/post/cumulative>

If you want to know how to figure out the energy management bit, my 'Fatigue Reset' online course has helped many people figure this out! And remember you can use code 'EXERCISE' at checkout to get your £10 ticket price from today off the cost: <https://pamelarose.podia.com>

Question: What about the pace/speed of walking? Do you recommend thinking about that too when you're starting to walk?

Answer: There are so many different elements you can/should take into account when starting to move more – and I've tried to cover the key ones in the limited time we had today. But yes, speed of walking is absolutely key. In today's webinar I stressed the importance of keeping walks 'comfortable'. By that, I mean that it has to feel relatively easy and manageable. But of course that's a very personal thing and needs to be gauged by each person individually. However, it's usually the case that people find keeping their speed of walking fairly slow at first is very much a part of what makes it feel comfortable. So yes, definitely give that some clear thought.

Once you get to 10 minutes every other day, at that stage you *may* be able to start pushing your pace a bit. But it's at that time that things tend to vary a lot from person to person, and I'm afraid I'm only comfortable giving specific guidance about that when I'm working with someone 1:1. We'd get into how things have been going for you in quite a bit of detail, I'd be watching your body language and listening to your words to identify if everything is really seeming as positive as you might be hoping it is! There's so much I'd get into with someone I'm helping, in order to best guide them as to how to build up from that 10 minute mark. It's so much more than a general piece of advice I can give I'm afraid! The best general advice I can give is to repeat my steer to be honest with what feels right for you.

Question: Do you think it's important for people to find, and maintain, a sense of calm when exercising? Perhaps via practising nice calming deep breaths while walking etc? And how do you work with that at the faster paces when breathwork becomes trickier?

Answer: Finding ways to keep your system calm (not just your conscious mind!) is so important for anyone on a fatigue journey. For some it's a huge piece of the puzzle, for others just an additional step to take. But yes, if you feel your system getting stimulated when you're walking outdoors, for example, think about things you can do to get it back into a calmer place. That might be nice calming breaths, but it's also often helpful to do some lovely positive self talk. There are lots of ways you can calm your system.

However, the key thing is to feel **confident** about your plan. I talked about confidence a lot in today's webinar, because it's such a key part to being able to stay calm as you start to put it

into action. You could do all the calming techniques in the world, but if you then go forward to act out an exercise plan which is completely wrong for you, it would be very difficult for your mind and body to stay feeling calm about that!! Whereas a plan that feels smart and right for YOU immediately helps to settle your mind and keeps your body in the calm state that you've been working on getting it to.

Picking up specifically about breathwork becoming trickier as you pick up your pace/start to run – I'd say this is either a sign that it's a bit too much still for you (for now). Or, see my point above about the Respiratory Physio...it might be that talking to an expert about ensuring your breathing, and relevant muscles, are as optimal as they can be! Finally, it could be that at that stage, breathwork isn't the right calming technique because your body needs to choose its own breathing pace while running. In which case, think about the other calming practices you can incorporate.

Question: You mentioned the importance of no instances of reactive rest. Can you go into that in a bit more detail please?

Answer: Sure! Reactive Rest is what I call those times where you might be in the middle of something, or have just finished an activity, and you get such a wave of fatigue (and possibly other symptoms) that you find yourself thinking "Goodness there's **no way** I can keep going right now, I HAVE to go and lie down/rest".

By definition, this is a form of 'booming and busting'. You've pushed your tolerance for certain things, and probably your energy levels overall, to such an extent that your system must stop. Your body surfaces a clear message to your conscious mind that it NEEDS you to stop and do nothing. And, of course, if that happens then please listen to yourself and go and rest 😊

But if this is happening at least once or twice most days, this is an indication that you're not at baseline. Because the whole lovely point of finding your baseline, and sticking to it, is that you let your energy flow smartly across the day, with none of the 'booming and busting' that probably used to happen in the past. (Booming and busting is when you 'Boom' your activity levels by doing something really quite big...but then experience a 'Bust' afterwards when you feel so symptomatic that you have to stop. Sometimes for days, not just hours).

This is why it's one of my 4 clear markers for knowing you're at baseline. The occasional need to do reactive rest is ok – some weeks we have a day where we have to "step up and meet life", as I like to call it. Meaning you have to push yourself above baseline to get to a medical appointment or something else important. In which case, listen to your body and definitely rest more than usual. But this shouldn't be happening as the norm.

Knowing how much you need to rest (and plan it in, rather than doing it reactively) is such an important part of pacing and energy management! I cover that too, in my Fatigue Reset course if you feel you've never quite mastered this.