

Tired of Being Tired: Managing Auditory Fatigue

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Harry meets a friend but after an hour, he wants to sit alone in the quiet for a while.

Beth goes to a doctor's appointment and by the time she leaves, she is ready for a nap.

Carter goes to an event with family. As the event continues, he finds it more challenging to understand what everyone is saying and starts to daydream.

These people likely experienced auditory fatigue. Auditory fatigue is real and is experienced on occasion by many people with hearing loss, whether deaf or hard of hearing in one ear or both, or whether their hearing loss is mild, moderate, severe, or profound.

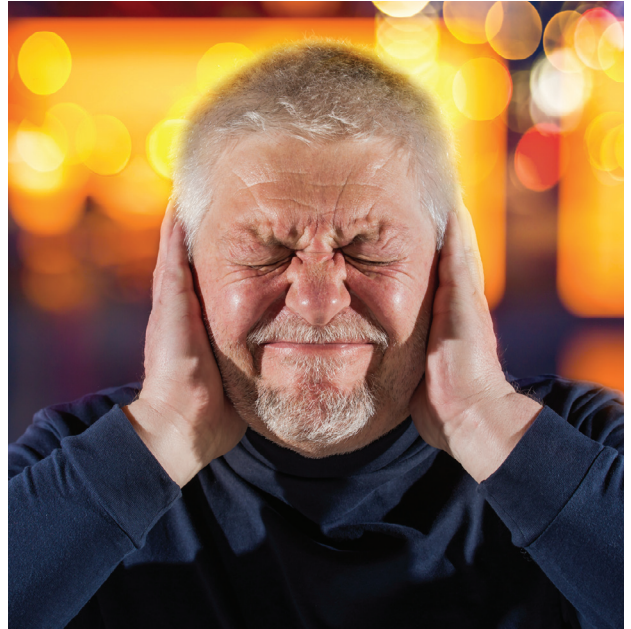
WHAT IS AUDITORY FATIGUE?

Auditory fatigue presents in many ways. It can be challenges with paying attention. For others, it may be the feeling of being tired or unable to listen any more after a listening effort. Some experience a strong desire to be in a quiet space or away from other people or sounds. Auditory fatigue can happen regardless of age and is experienced by infants, children, adolescents, and adults of all ages.

Auditory fatigue may be known by different names, including listening fatigue, ear fatigue, concentration fatigue, or cognitive energy fatigue.

WHY DOES AUDITORY FATIGUE HAPPEN?

When you have a hearing loss, your brain uses more areas to try to make sense of the sounds and words you are hearing and to figure out the words you did not hear. Your brain works harder to hear and understand a message if it is not clear or if you are listening in noise. The brain has a heavier processing load to figure out messages that are missed, tuning out noise in the room, and other listening tasks. The brain works harder to hear and understand and that increases stress and the feeling of fatigue.



WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I EXPERIENCE AUDITORY FATIGUE?

When you are fatigued, whether you are aware of it or not, your body responds. Some changes are hidden, such as increased cortisol, a stress hormone, but there are some warning signs that are easier to identify, including:

- headaches, especially after listening
- increased feeling of stress after listening
- increased feeling of being tired or wanting to be in quiet after listening
- challenges with concentrating as a conversation continues
- challenges with performance at work or school, especially at the end of the day.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF AUDITORY FATIGUE?

In children, fatigue is associated with reduced performance in school, increased absence from school, sleep disturbances,



From left: **Lindsay Zombek** provides aural rehabilitation services for children and adults at University Hospitals Cleveland Medical Center, and **Donna L. Sorkin** is the executive director of the American Cochlear Implant Alliance, helping to expand awareness of and access to CIs. www.acialliance.org



The Hearing Journal is proud to announce a partnership with the American Cochlear Implant Alliance to provide patient handouts.

and changes in social relationships. For adults, fatigue is associated with higher need for sick days at work and health complaints such as headaches, and increased stress hormones. People may experience these adverse reactions due to auditory fatigue and not know auditory fatigue exists or recognize that their fatigue is due to listening.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

- Recognize auditory fatigue is real and consider auditory fatigue when you notice changes in the behavior or energy of yourself or of someone, adult or child, who is deaf or hard of hearing.
- Recognize the warning signs.
- Anticipate it and prevent it when you can.

PREVENTING AUDITORY FATIGUE

- Use appropriate amplification, which reduces listening effort.
- Consider assistive listening devices which can improve the signal-to-noise ratio.
- Consider using captioning and speech-to-text services.
- Strategically select where you sit by situating yourself near a key speaker or those you most want to hear, and away from noise sources like music speakers, kitchen noise, and heating and cooling systems.
- Plan listening breaks.

WHAT ARE LISTENING BREAKS?

Listening breaks are times when you are not accountable for what you are hearing. These can be times spent in quiet without others talking. Length varies by individual but may be effective even after a few minutes. Listening breaks can be helpful in advance of listening situations such as a break before an appointment, a quiet ride to work or school, or a rest before a party or social situation. Listening breaks can be built into a lengthy noisy situation by planning a few minutes of quiet into a work or school day, such as a quiet break before lunch and recess. Adults might take a brief step outside as appropriate in a meeting or social setting. After events, plan for some down time, such as going straight home after an appointment versus a noisy restaurant, time after work or school to decompress before evening activities. Such breaks may only need to be a few minutes to achieve rejuvenation, though some people may require more time.

By acknowledging, identifying, preventing, and managing auditory fatigue, people who are deaf and hard of hearing may increase their ability to participate in activities longer, stay more engaged, and feel better after. 

For more resources on listening fatigue, check out these ACI Alliance blog posts:

<https://www.acialliance.org/blogpost/1334356/311879/Listening-Effort-and-Fatigue-Part-1>
<https://www.acialliance.org/blogpost/1334356/312368/Listening-Effort-and-Fatigue-Part-2>