

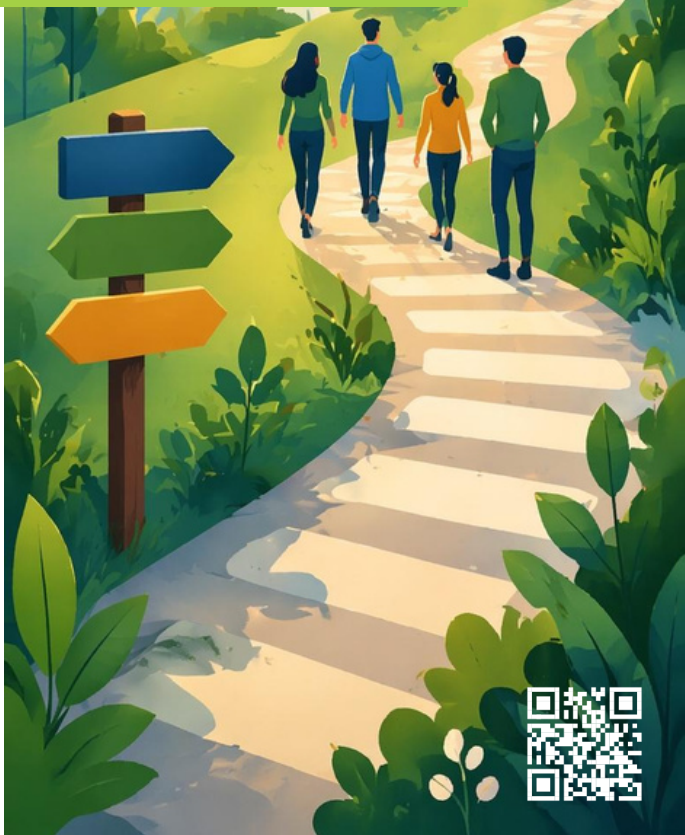
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Therapy, Training and
Counselling Centre

Return to Work with Fatigue

Working despite Fatigue



1. What is fatigue?

«At first, you feel like you've been given a diagnosis, you know a bit about what it is [...]. And then [...] things just don't turn out exactly as you expected. [...] You don't know that much about it yet, because it's so personal.»

Employer, focus group interview [1] Appendix I

This quote from an employer illustrates just how complex and individual the process of supporting employees with fatigue can be. Fatigue (as a clinical condition) describes a multifaceted condition characterised by severe exhaustion, listlessness and cognitive impairments, which has significant public health implications for work capacity, accident risk and healthcare [2]. Unlike everyday tiredness, fatigue cannot be alleviated by restorative measures such as sleep and noticeably impairs those affected in terms of their quality of life and ability to cope with everyday tasks [3].

According to the GEDA-2023 study, 29.7% of adults in Germany report a level of exhaustion that is classified as fatigue [2]. This study has been deliberately chosen as a reference, because, unlike pre-pandemic Swiss surveys, it covers a broad age range from 18 years onwards. Fatigue can occur in many conditions, either as a condition in its own right or as an accompanying symptom. Examples include multiple sclerosis, cancer, Long COVID, rheumatological and endocrine disorders, depression, and myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS) [4,5].

The experience of employers cited at the outset illustrates that (re)integration is always an individual process. There is no standard formula. Nevertheless, helpful guidelines from practice and research can support employers in this process.

Side note: ME/CFS – when fatigue is not simply fatigue

ME/CFS (Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome) is a distinct, severe neuroimmunological disorder (a condition affecting both the nervous and immune systems). It is not simply a «severe form of fatigue», rather, it has its own defining symptom: post-exertional malaise (PEM) [5]. When ME/CFS is suspected or diagnosed, it is advisable to consult the ME/CFS Switzerland specialist centre (www.mecfs.ch).

Post-exertional malaise (PEM):

A characteristic feature is that symptoms often set in only 12 to 72 hours after exertion and can last for days or weeks. Those affected may appear productive one day and be unfit for work two days later. Even moderate exertion, such as a long working day, can trigger such a crash [5-7].

In practical terms: For work planning, this means that the effects of exertion often appear with a delay. You should therefore build in buffers, for example in shift scheduling.

2. Fatigue in everyday working life

Fatigue can present in many different ways. This makes it all the more important to understand how the condition presents itself in everyday working life. Here we present the tip of the iceberg: a few characteristics that will help you better assess the situation from your perspective.

2.1 Fluctuating performance

Fatigue means that, despite rest, sufficient recovery does not occur [8,9]. Performance can fluctuate significantly not only from day to day, but also within a single working day. Furthermore, the effects of exertion often appear with a delay. This makes planning and task allocation within the team difficult. However, it is not a question of willpower, but a symptom of the condition.

«And then came the day when NOTHING worked. And that was already the case after just five minutes.»

Employer, focus group interview [1] Appendix I

Fatigue manifests itself on two levels:

- On a cognitive level, it appears as difficulties with concentration and memory, accompanied by a feeling of mental heaviness, often referred to as «brain fog» [6].
- On a physical level, headaches, muscle and joint pain, dizziness and autonomic dysregulation can occur [9,10]. Because both sets of symptoms can fluctuate, work capacity remains difficult to predict.

2.2 Sensitivity to stimuli

Over 80% of those affected experience hypersensitivity to light, noise, smells or temperature changes [11]. This can be so severe that even everyday activities feel overwhelming [12]. Typical work environments such as open-plan offices, computer-based work or frequent meetings therefore represent a significant source of sensory overload and exacerbate fatigue [6,8].

In practical terms: Discuss with the employee whether a stimulus-reduced workspace is possible. For example a quiet room, dimmed lighting, noise-cancelling headphones or regular breaks from the screen.

3. Communication and collaboration

3.1 Maintain open and transparent communication

As fatigue is often invisible to others, regular, respectful discussions about the current situation and possible adjustments are essential. Normalise the topics of energy levels and the need for breaks within the workplace. This benefits the whole team [13].

In practical terms: Arrange fixed meeting times (e.g. every two weeks) to discuss workload, capacity and necessary adjustments. Where possible, schedule these for times when the employee has more energy. Put agreements in writing.

3.2 Dealing with sensitive discussions

Conversations about fatigue can be challenging for everyone involved. Those affected often report feelings of guilt and fear of being seen as less capable. Avoid statements such as «You just need to pull yourself together» [8]. Open questions are more helpful: «What do you need right now?», «How can I support you?»

In practical terms: Prepare for conversations and make sure to ask open-ended questions without judgement.

3.3 Involving the team: understanding and destigmatisation

A lack of understanding among colleagues is often a barrier [8]. When the team understands why someone needs different break patterns or works more flexibly, acceptance grows.

In practical terms: With the employee's consent, inform the team about the condition. Together, discuss how tasks can be distributed fairly.

3.4 Multidisciplinary collaboration: occupational therapy, job coaching, case management, IV (Swiss Disability Insurance)

Successful support for employees with fatigue, whether they are working continuously or returning after an absence, benefits from collaboration between various specialists. Occupational therapists, job coaches, case managers and the IV can together build a support network [14]. As an employer, you can also draw on this support, provided the requirements are met.

In practical terms: If necessary, involve external specialists in consultation with the employee. Occupational therapists and job coaches can advise you on planning and implementing workplace adjustments. The IV may fund job coaching.

3.5 Building targeted knowledge

A lack of knowledge about fatigue has been identified as a key barrier in the return to work process [7,8].

In practical terms: Make use of information resources from specialist organisations (e.g. ME/CFS Switzerland), exchange experiences with other employers and speak to the person affected. People affected by fatigue are often well informed about their condition.

3.6 Self-assessment and external assessment

Employees with fatigue tend to push themselves too hard in order to meet expectations, which worsens health problems in the long term [15]. At the same time, employers may underestimate the invisible symptoms.

In practical terms: Regular progress meetings and realistic goal-setting are crucial here.

4. Active leadership responsibility

4.1 Attitude as an employer

A proactive attitude is crucial: employers who offer trust, appreciation and support contribute significantly to successful reintegration. Negative attitudes and an unwillingness to adapt make the process considerably more difficult [8,13].

In practical terms: Actively show your willingness to support, for example by checking in regularly, being flexible with adjustments and staying open to individual solutions.

4.2 Establish a culture of taking breaks in the workplace

Breaks are not an interruption, but a necessary strategy for maintaining performance levels. Rest periods must be actively scheduled before exhaustion sets in [13,16].

In practical terms: Offer flexible break models and allow individual break patterns tailored to employees' needs. → Where flexible breaks are not possible, options include micro breaks (3 to 5 minutes per hour), redistributing tasks (grouping low energy activities) or adjusted shift patterns (avoiding double shifts after peak workloads).

4.3 Financial and existential fears on both sides

Small businesses in particular are under economic pressure. Not all adjustments can be implemented in every sector. Depending on company size and the nature of the business, you may encounter structural limitations as an employer. For example, in physically demanding professions (care, manufacturing, hospitality, trades) or in shift work, working from home, quiet rooms or flexible breaks are often only possible to a limited extent. It is therefore advisable to clarify potential funding sources early on [17].

- The costs of necessary workplace adjustments may be covered by the Swiss Disability Insurance (IV), subject to prior approval.
- The IV may provide wage subsidies during the training phase if the employee's work capacity is still limited.
- Depending on the individual case, accident, health or liability insurance may also apply [8].

In practical terms: Contact your cantonal IV office early on to clarify which measures and funding options are available in your case. **This makes cooperation with external specialists and the IV all the more important.**

5. Support structures for employers

As an employer, you do not have to manage (re)integration on your own. Various support services are available in Switzerland (outlined here in simplified form).

5.1 The IV system at a glance: integration measures and the step by-step process

Vocational reintegration in Switzerland is heavily influenced by the IV. It operates on the principle of «integration before pension». Early intervention can be initiated from 30 days of incapacity for work. The IV offers retraining, career guidance, workplace adaptations and job coaching, and covers part of the costs subject to prior approval. Important to note: Each service is assessed on a case-by-case basis to determine eligibility → there is no general entitlement. Prior authorisation must be obtained before the service is provided [17,18].

5.2 Roles of professionals (job coaches, occupational therapists and case managers)

Different professionals can provide support during the reintegration process for fatigue. The following overview is illustrative. Funding arrangements vary from case to case and must be clarified in advance (cost approval).

- **Job coaches:** Individual support directly at the workplace, helping with workplace design and setting realistic performance goals. Funding through the IV is possible as part of integration measures [17].
- **Occupational therapists:** Workplace analysis and adjustments, mediation between the person affected (employee) and the employer, organisation of round-table discussions to find joint solutions. Funding may be available from the IV, UV (Accident Insurance) or KGV (sickness benefit insurance) depending on the situation [10,19].
- **Case managers:** Responsible for case management and coordinating of all parties involved. Their services are usually provided and funded by daily sickness benefit insurance (KGV) or accident insurance (IV). In addition, the IV, pension funds or employers may also commission and fund case management [20].
- **Specialist doctors:** Assessing medical fitness for work and providing recommendations on workload and capacity.

- **Social workers:** Providing advice on existential hardships and social security law issues. They work in public social services (local authorities), specialist advice centres (e.g. Pro Infirmis) or as in-house workplace social counsellors. Funding depends on their employment setting and comes from the public sector, foundations or the employer [21].

5.3 Points of contact

- **Cantonal IV offices:** Early detection, integration measures, funding for job coaching and workplace adaptations → Contact through your cantonal IV office.
- **SECO (State Secretariat for Economic Affairs):** Information on employment law, protection against dismissal in the event of illness and the duty of care varies depending on the situation, contract, length of service and insurance arrangements → www.seco.admin.ch
- **ME/CFS Switzerland:** Information platforms on the condition, current research and events. → www.mecfs.ch / www.sgme.ch
- **Thetritz (ZHAW):** Energy management training for those affected, job coaching and workplace analyses by occupational therapists. Funding available via IV or insurance. → Tel.: 058 934 40 00/ empfang.thetritz@hin.ch
- **Inclusion Handicap:** Free legal advice on IV procedures, employment law and equality. → www.inclusion-handicap.ch / Tel.: 031 370 08 35

6. Checklist for employers

Build up your knowledge

- ☐ Acquire basic knowledge about fatigue, ME/CFS, PEM and sensory sensitivity
- ☐ Make use of information resources from specialist organisations (USZ, ME/CFS Switzerland, SGME)
- ☐ Talk to the person affected, those affected often know their condition best

Structure communication

- ☐ Schedule regular progress meetings (e.g. every two weeks)
- ☐ Put agreements in writing
- ☐ Ask open ended questions rather than giving advice
- ☐ Inform the team with the consent of the person concerned

Adapt the workplace

- ☐ Enable flexible break arrangements (regular screen breaks)
- ☐ Provide low-stimulus retreat areas (quiet room, dimmed lighting, noisecancelling headphones)
- ☐ Adjust workload and tasks gradually and realistically
- ☐ Explore the possibility of working from home

Take on a leadership role

- ☐ Understand energy management as a corporate responsibility and lead by example
- ☐ Encourage a culture of taking breaks within the team
- ☐ Watch out for early warning signs of overload within the team
- ☐ Set targets based on current capacity, not past performance

Seek support

- ☐ Consult and involve external specialists early on (occupational therapy, job coaching)
- ☐ Clarify options under the IV scheme (early identification, funding)
- ☐ Contact SECO or Inclusion Handicap for legal queries

