

The Tired Patient

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One of the most challenging diagnostic problems that comes into the physician's office is the patient who complains of "being tired." It can prove to be a frustrating experience for the physician (especially if the physician is also tired) and to the patient.

This article will propose and describe a two-pronged systematic approach to the patient that can increase the probability of a satisfying outcome for both physician and patient. This approach assumes the "complaint" of every patient has both *informational value* ("I think there's something wrong.") and *transactional meaning* ("Please take care of me."). Tiredness, fatigue, "exhaustion" need to be seen simultaneously as information and need. Both aspects require simultaneous work-up.

Differential Diagnosis of Fatigue

The vagueness of the nonspecific complaint of tiredness covers a host of possibilities from brain tumor through incipient diabetes to being up all night with a sick child. However, most tired patients fall into one of three major subgroups of fatigue.

I. Physiologic Fatigue

Patients and physicians are prone to ignore the fact that fatigue is reasonable to expect in the following circumstances:

1. Prolonged physical exertion without adequate rest.
2. Inadequate amount or restless sleep. Drugs may interfere with

REM sleep, such as many of the hypnotics and some tranquilizers. Drugs which have little effect on REM sleep are flurazepam (Dalmane) and doxepin (Sinequan).

3. Acute severe dieting or chronic moderate dieting. Ketosis, negative nitrogen balance.
4. Sedentary life style.
Poor cardiopulmonary reserve.
5. Pregnancy.
Prenatal and postpartum.
6. Prolonged mental stress.
7. Advancing age.
Decreased physiologic reserve.

II. Acute Fatigue

Lassitude or tiredness of recent or sudden onset should direct the physician's attention towards:

1. *Prodrome or sequelae of acute infection.* Among the worst offenders are the meningitides, cerebral ab-

ness, mononucleosis, and most viral infection.

2. *Metabolic disturbance.* Any fluid or electrolyte imbalance, especially with extracellular fluid deficiency, whether naturally occurring or iatrogenic, is associated with fatigue. Hyponatremia and hypo and hypermagnesiumemia are most notable although hypokalemia is most common.
3. *Circulatory failure and/or digitalis toxicity.*
4. *Hemolytic anemia and acute leukemia.*

III. Chronic Fatigue

Longer, more insidious causes are found here and the differential diagnosis includes:

1. *Chronic infection.* These possibilities include subacute bacterial endocarditis, tuberculosis, brucellosis, parasitic infestations, and chronic pyelonephritis or osteomyelitis.
2. *Anemias.* Megaloblastic and iron deficiency anemias are most common but consider also polycythemia and hemoglobinopathies.
3. *Nutritional dysfunction.* Any deficiency in diet, such as calories, protein, or vitamins, may induce fatigue. A careful nutritional history is important since a "normal" diet may mean that the patient is a vegetarian or macrobiotic "freak." Pellagra and cerebral beri-beri have not disappeared. Exogenous obesity

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is exhausting in itself.

4. *Chronic exogenous intoxication.* Careful attention should be directed to common chronic intoxicants such as alcohol, barbiturates, and minor tranquilizers as well as less common ones, such as heavy metal, gasoline, carbon monoxide, and insecticide/pesticide poisoning.
5. *Chronic endogenous intoxication.* Most commonly uremia and hepatic insufficiency.
6. *Endocrine disorders.* The following are associated with fatigue: diabetes mellitus, hyper and hypopituitarism, hyper and hypoadrenal function, hyper and hypothyroid function, and hyperparathyroidism.
7. *Malignancies.* Fatigue may be an early sign and is a common accompaniment of middle and end-stage malignancy.
8. *Iatrogenic fatigue.* The following drugs are frequently associated with fatigue as a significant side effect:
All sedatives and hypnotics
All tranquilizers
All antihistamines
Most anticonvulsants
Most analgesics and salicylates
Nicotine
Tetracyclines
Colchicine
Cycloserine
Adrenocorticosteroids
Progesterones (ie, many birth control pills)
Ergot alkaloids
Insulin
Mild digitalis toxicity
Mild Vitamin A toxicity
Mild Vitamin D toxicity
9. *Neuropsychiatric dysfunction.* Including intracranial neoplasia, subdural and extradural hematomas, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, narcolepsy, myasthenia gravis, Sydenham chorea, depression, hysterical characters, hyperventilation, and chronic anxiety.

Making the Diagnosis

Crucial to the differential diagnosis of fatigue is a careful history. Detailed information on the following items should be obtained:

1. Onset of symptom; relationship to known factors such as starting medication, increased activity, decreas-

ed sleep, important life changes such as job and new family member; duration; periodicity; intensity; and associated symptoms.

2. Careful family history of diabetes, anemia, endocrine disturbances, depression, alcoholism.

3. Full review of systems — perhaps using a self report or automated history taking.

4. Oral intake history — *anything* the patient puts into his/her mouth both in terms of nutrition and in terms of drugs. Careful inquiry concerning daily use of some over-the-counter or prescribed medication, as well as alcohol and caffeine intake, may be especially rewarding.

Having elicited the above history, consider which subgroup of fatigue the patient falls into — physiologic, acute, or chronic fatigue. Taking cognizance of the differential diagnosis suggested by the particular subgroup of fatigue, next move to a complete physical examination and related appropriate laboratory and x-ray examinations. Special exams are done when indicated by history or by age of the patient. In the physical examination, special attention is focused on evidence of muscle wasting, organomegaly, lymphadenopathy, and skin changes. Laboratory examination routinely includes a CBC with differential, urinalysis, and a chemistry panel with blood sugar and liver function studies. Other studies are done as indicated by clinical status and age.

In spite of its lack of scientific status the clinician may rely heavily on the intuitive sense that “something’s up” and that this should be pursued. Trust in intuitive skills is important in the work-up of the “tired patient” since chronic fatigue may precede positive physical and laboratory findings. In the authors’ experience a careful history and physical examination will uncover 80-85 percent of causes, the screening laboratory studies an additional five percent, and the remainder will require more time and repeated evaluation.

A threshold model is often useful to explain chronic fatigue since in many cases the causes are multiple and additive. For example, chronic fatigue may be precipitated by a minimal anemia in a patient already at threshold as a result of chronic minimal sleep loss (baby in the house) and minimal increase in usual physical acti-

vity (toddler in the house). For many patients such a reality orientation is both reassuring (ie, there’s nothing seriously wrong) and educational (ie, maybe I can alter one aspect of the pattern and feel better).

Through this approach it is often possible to avoid a fruitless search for esoteric explanations. At the same time, it is important to be particularly wary of snap “psychiatric” or “organic” explanations of fatigue. Invariably the “organically” caused fatigue has an emotional reaction associated with it that requires attention. The patient who becomes depressed as a result of being on reserpine is no less a suicide risk! Thus while running down the “organic” causes (ie, the informational aspect of the complaint) the transactional or need side of the complaint should also be attended to. A psychiatric “explanation” of fatigue is never a diagnosis of exclusion. If no positive evidence of psychiatric disease is found using conservative diagnosis then it may be concluded that the etiology is still unknown and that it is necessary to continue to explore with the patient sources of fatigue. Just as a diagnosis of anemia requires significant change in red cell indices, so a diagnosis of depression or hysterical character requires significant positive evidence. The skilled clinician never diagnoses purely by exclusion.

Common Patterns of Tired Patients

In everyday practice, there are several major patterns for the tired patient which merit further discussion.

1. Depression

The first major group of tired patients are the depressive patients and patients with depressive equivalents. A developmental appreciation of depression is important since depression is manifested in different ways according to age, sex, and socioeconomic status. Infants and children rarely manifest depression by the typical “lowered mood.” Infants and children may be manifesting depression when they are hyperactive; running away; withdrawing; having school, eating, or sleeping problems; and when having vague physical complaints. Adolescents like-

Table 1. Discriminators of Depression by Socioeconomic Class*

Low	Middle	High
Affective		
Hopelessness	Loneliness	Decreased social life
Self-accusation	Helplessness	Pessimism
Crying	Guilt	Dissatisfaction
Dissatisfaction	Crying	Anxiety-Tension
Guilt	Anxiety-Tension	
Depressed Mood	Depressed Mood	
Somatic		
Palpitation	Decreased Sex Drive	Fatigue
Headache	Urinary complaints	Insomnia
Anorexia	Trouble falling asleep	
Waking Early	Headache	
	Anorexia	
	Waking early	

*Adapted from Schwab⁷

and Hollister.¹ A brief summary of their work is shown in Table 2.

On the treatment side of the equation one can rely heavily on both the relationship with the patient (frequent brief visits) and an aggressive psychopharmacological approach. Having selected an appropriate psychoactive agent, one should persist with that agent for from three to six weeks and push the total daily dosage to near "toxic" levels. If the patient is not having side effects the "treatment" is not likely to be effective. The attempt to involve the family in the treatment program is often rewarding; the authors concur with Cammer's finding that the family can greatly facilitate progress.² Once entertained, the possibility of the patient having a depression has been whether as a primary source of tiredness or secondary to other "organic" illness, the authors believe a direct inquiry into the patient's potential for suicide is mandatory. Continued attention to this risk is necessary throughout the treatment course of the depressed patient.

wise may frequently "act out" depressive conflicts with the result that depression manifests in boys as anti-social behavior or poor school performance, in girls in sexual misconduct or running away, and in both by "doing drugs," drinking, and through psychosomatic problems. Young adults more frequently somatize or act out depression than evidence a classic picture. By middle age the more typical "textbook" depressive pictures are seen, but the physician should also be aware that depression continues to manifest often via acting out behaviors — particularly sexual and drug — and in somatic problems. At all stages "accidents" may be depressive, unconscious, self-destructive equivalents. A close look at the antecedents of "accidents" is worthwhile.

Somatization is a theme that also pervades the life cycle of depressive equivalents. Gastrointestinal symptoms lead the way as an arena for the expression of depression. The irritable colon syndrome is the most common equivalent, but it is well to remember

that other functional or organic syndromes, such as peptic ulcer and ulcerative colitis, can be "symptoms" of depression and are commonly accompanied by depression. While any organ system may be involved, skin disorders and pain syndromes (headache, backache, residual pain) lead the list after the GI tract.

Tiredness is a very common symptom of depression. It is important to recognize that the signs and symptoms of depression vary not only by age but also by sex and socioeconomic status. Males more commonly manifest depression by lowered mood, pessimism, guilt, and a sense of helplessness. Comparable early signs in women are insomnia, headache, and social withdrawal. Table 1 points out the variation in the presentation of depression by the patient's socioeconomic background.

Once depression has been recognized, then the attempt must be made to decide whether it is normal (as in grief), typical, or atypical. Depression may be classified following Grinker

2. Hysteria

A second group of tired patients are the so-called hysterics. Woodruff and Guze³ have developed a diagnostic pattern characteristic of the hysteric. This includes:

- a. a complicated or dramatic medical history
- b. a minimum of 25 symptoms in nine of ten systems in the review of symptoms ("a positive review of systems")
- c. a minimum of 25 symptoms without a medical explanation of etiology

If a patient meets Guze's criteria, there is a 90 percent chance that the clinical condition will remain stable and that other *serious* medical and psychiatric illnesses will *not* develop. This can be explained to the patient and also has an effect on the management of these patients.

These patients represent a very small proportion of medical practice. It is crucial that the diagnosis be limited to those patients meeting

Table 2. Classification and Treatment of Depression

Retarded Depression	Anxious Depression	Hostile Depression	Hypochondriacal
Deeply depressed	Much "unworthiness" and guilt	Paranoid and projective	Little guilt
Psychomotor retardation	Agitated	Hostile belligerency	Moderate depression
Lacks environmental reactivity	Reactive to environment		Agitated
Loss of interest in life		Hopelessness	Feels "abandoned and unloved"
Visceral symptoms	Reports anxiety	Angry	Multiple somatic complaints
No self-pity	Self-pity		
No sense of humor	May have sense of humor — teasing in character	Sense of humor is often sadomasochistic in character	
No precipitating stress ("it came over me like a black cloud")	Precipitating stress		
Tends to be older	Prior history of neurotic or behavioral problems common	Prior history of neurotic or behavior problems common	Lifelong history of disturbances
Weight loss common			
Early morning or middle of the night awakening	Trouble falling asleep		
Suicidal	Tends to cling to MD	Provocative	Demanding
Best psychopharmacologic agents	Best psychopharmacologic agents	No best psychopharmacologic agent	Psychopharmacologic agents likely to associate with many "troublesome side effects"
— imipramine (Tofranil)	— phenothiazines like perphenazine (Trilafon)	— often need a combination of a tricyclic and a phenothiazine	
— amitriptyline (Elavil)	plus psychotherapy may use doxepin (Sinequan) as alternative agent		
plus supportive psychotherapy — if no response after adequate dosage over three weeks consider electroconvulsive treatment			

Guze's criteria since otherwise it is possible to get into a sophisticated kind of name calling. No one denies the existence of these patients, but the etiology has often been hotly debated. It seems important that the presence of this life-style not be denied but rather that the possibility of a positive outcome be maximized. This includes:

- a. not putting the patient through the pain and expense of a nonproductive work-up
- b. recognizing the transactional nature of the complaint
- c. recommending appropriate "treatment" which for a female patient can include suggesting that she re-examine her current role in view of changing women's roles
- d. allowing the physician to recognize the common counter-transference problems of frustration, anger, undue interest, and therapeutic impotence in dealing with these patients

3. Situational Exhaustion

A third important group of tired patients are those exhibiting "situational exhaustion." This is a form of physiologic tiredness but is common enough to merit special comment. These are situations where being tired is an appropriate response and symptomatic purely of lack of rest, relaxation, and sleep. This commonsense diagnosis needs only two caveats. Be aware that in spite of all labor-saving devices many people continue to have too much to do. And also be aware that many "workaholics" are appropriately tired as a result of their being driven internally.

The "workaholic" needs to be advised of the diagnosis and sometimes given prognosis of the condition. "Hard work" or "overwork" often is a symptom of underlying personal or family problems. The person must be educated to appreciate that chronic overwork:

- a. is a symptom
- b. may well be detrimental to long-range physical and emotional health and happiness
- c. is treatable using "reality"⁴ and family therapy techniques.

The physician's role in treatment may be to involve the patient's family, and together with the patient and family realign health priorities and responsibility.

4. Stress and Exhaustion

A fourth group of tired patients exhibit stress and exhaustion. Be attentive to chronic stress or a recent increase in stress on a patient. It is known that life changes are additive and can lead to increased illness and accidents.⁵ There is evidence to indicate that chronic overwork plus a sudden recent work increase is a cardiac "drain" and often antecedes an acute myocardial infarct.⁶ An "enforced" vacation may be in order for these patients and certainly a "prescribed" change of pace is in order. The examples of this are innumerable but keep in mind several practice-related situations:

- a. Families with chronically ill or dying members (especially if the patient is a child).
- b. Families in considerable emotional conflict often manifested by sexual problems.
- c. Upwardly mobile young men and women.

5. Chronic Anxiety and Hyperventilation

A final group of patients who experience chronic fatigue are the chronically anxious with or without hyperventilation syndrome. Included here is the cardiac neurotic who manifests fatigue and chest pain. True anginal chest pain is rarely associated with hyperventilation syndrome while most cardiac neurotics do have signs and symptoms of hyperventilation. Distinguishing features include deep sighs, perioral and peripheral tingling, blurred vision, and lightheadedness — common in hyperventilation, rare in true cardiac disease. Chronic anxiety, with

or without panic attacks, is best treated by using some form of relaxation therapy (biofeedback, meditation, relaxation techniques) in combination, in certain cases, with anxiety-reducing medications.

Conclusion

The tired patient presents the physician with an informational problem ("Tell me what is wrong with me.") and a transactional problem ("I'm scared about . . . and need you to take care of me."). Careful attention to both issues is crucial. Elucidation of the specific cause or causes of fatigue is sometimes difficult, but effective management requires an active diagnosis rather than a passive diagnosis by exclusion. If the causation is unclear the search must be continued until a positive explanation is evident. At the same time, attention to the "need" side of the equation is effective treatment for some patients in and of itself. Utilization of the basic skills of the physician and his or her team will result in effective intervention in most cases.

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