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COGNITION®

Motivation

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Getting Started, Keeping Going...

Getting Started...

A common problem that can impact our cognition is Apathy. This is a motivation problem with **getting started**.

There are lots of ways in which individuals can experience difficulties with getting started. It can impact our ability to focus so we lose concentration, which can make remembering things harder.

Below are some things that people have said about this:

“Motivation is very difficult to find”

“It takes more effort to build up motivation than it used to”

“I think of something to do, but then put it off”

“It seems easier to just sit in front of the TV rather than make a decision”

“If it can be postponed, I will postpone it”

“I focus more on effort than benefit”

Apathy can affect the way we feel:

“My Emotional responses are dampened”

“I cannot react physiologically”

“I miss the physical side of emotion such as experiencing butterflies or changes in heart rate”

“I don't get excited about things anymore”

Apathy can also affect how we are with others:

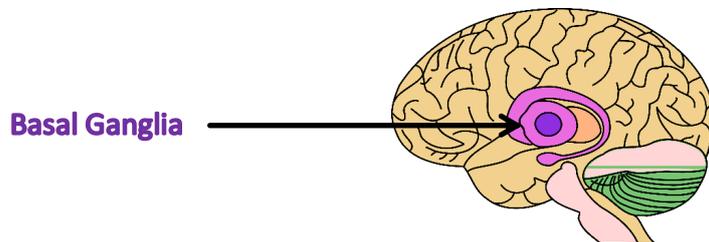
“I want to be able to keep up with the conversation, but I can't”

“I go out with other people, but rarely instigate things”

“I am afraid that I will run out of things to talk about”

As you can see, apathy can impact day-to-day life. It can also have an impact on other people, family members in particular.

Apathy can be pinpointed to a part of the brain known as the **basal ganglia** and its connection with the frontal lobes. Apathy is not laziness, it is a consequence of changes in this brain which can happen for a variety of reasons. But there are ways to help deal with apathy and to overcome it so your concentration, energy and memory are less affected.



Keeping Going...

Apathy has a sidekick known as **fatigue**, which can make coping even more difficult. Fatigue affects our ability to keep going (persist) with certain activities.

Fatigue is thought of as a persistent mental and/or physical sensation of tiredness, weakness or exhaustion. Here are some things people have said about fatigue:

“I am always tired before I start”

“Many things cost too much energy”

“Social situations are more effortful, near-exhausting”

Just like apathy, fatigue can affect your quality of life. While apathy can affect someone’s ability to initiate something, fatigue can affect an individual’s ability to persist with a certain activity. There are lots of different causes of fatigue, but it can occur as an emotional consequence of stresses, anxiety or mood problems.

Common myths about people suffering with apathy

X Myth: He doesn’t do anything useful anymore, he is just lazy.

✓ **Fact:** People with apathy often still have the desire to do things but they find it difficult to get going:

“I have interests in things, but don’t act on them”

“My get up and go has got up and gone!”

X Myth: She spends all day sitting around doing nothing, she must be depressed.

✓ **Fact:** Although apathy can look a lot like depression, and some people experience depression, not all people with apathy get depressed:

“I’m happy to sit and watch the birds in the garden for hours”

X Myth: He is fine to do some things, but struggles with chores, is he making it up?

✓ **Fact:** Levels of apathy can vary and apathy can affect some behaviours and not others. When something is meaningful it is often easier to get going.

“I struggle to initiate actions, especially mundane things”

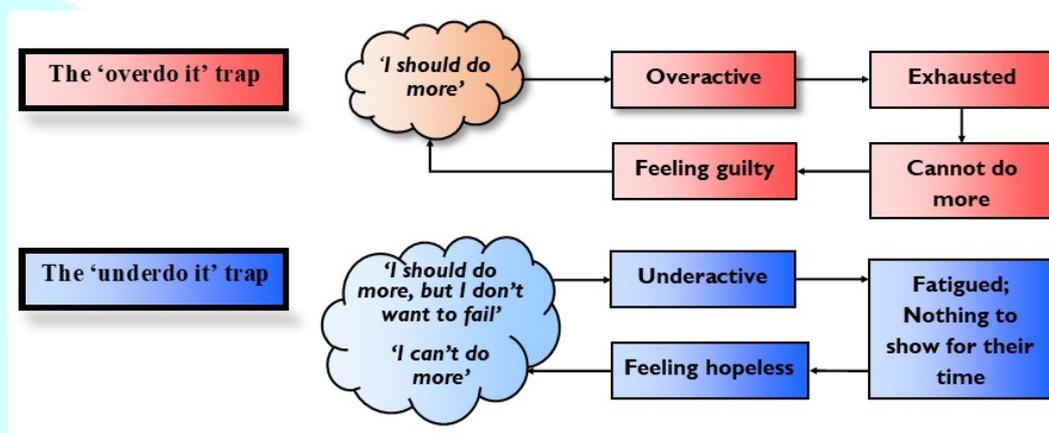
What causes apathy and fatigue to persist? Common “traps”

While apathy and fatigue occur as a result of changes in the brain, we now know that things can be done to relieve the problem. However, people can also do things that cause the problem to persist. So, it is important to know what to do to make things easier and avoid falling into apathy and fatigue ‘traps’.

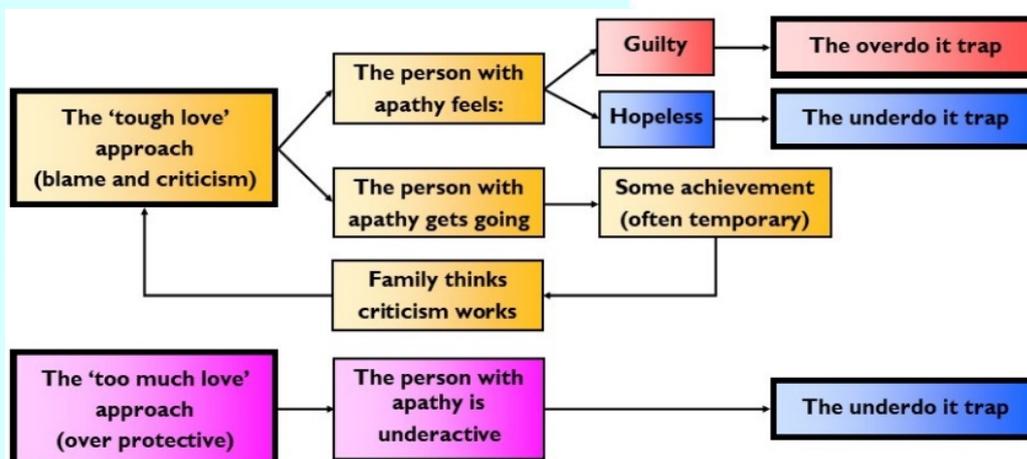
People are often unaware of the behaviours that keep the problem going. These can be attempts to feel better, for example taking a lot of rest or by challenging oneself, such as doing more than is realistic. Similarly, families and/or friends may try to help by either doing too much or by using pressure and ‘tough love’ to motivate a loved one. We call these **behavioural traps** because they create vicious cycles of apathy and fatigue that are driven by strategies that do not work in the long term. The following are some examples of behavioural traps.

Do you recognise yourself falling into any of these common apathy traps?

What the person with apathy does:



What the family does:



Apathy in context

John is 72 years old. He struggles with his get up and go (his motivation), particularly when it comes to household chores. His wife thinks he is lazy and tries to motivate him with a **'tough love'** approach, which John sees as criticism. Although sometimes, this results in some achievements for John, he is often unable to keep going. Most often, he feels guilty and sad, which leaves him unable to act but thinking 'I should do more'. John falls in the **'underdo it'** trap and his wife follows the **'tough love'** approach.

Occasionally, John forces himself to do as much as possible around the house in an attempt to compensate for his wife's daily efforts. However, he is unable to sustain this level of activity for long and feels exhausted. His fatigue persists and leaves him too tired to do things on the following days, again provoking his self-criticism, guilt and low mood as well as his wife's frustration. Here, John falls in the **'overdo it'** trap.

Mary is 69 years old. She has lost motivation to engage in her usual hobbies, such as painting. Although she tried it on one occasion, she could not paint as well as before and saw this as a failure, making her hopeless about the future and reducing her motivation further. Mary falls in the **'underdo it'** trap.

Mary's husband supports her with daily activities and chores, which leaves little for her to do and makes her feel useless. Mary's husband follows the **'too much love'** approach.

The importance of balanced activities

Common to all of these traps is not getting the correct **balance**. The pathway to managing apathy and fatigue is in getting the balance between activity and rest and the family getting the balance between encouragement and support.



Once you can identify the trap that you fall into, you can start to plan how to break free by changing behaviours and this is often as simple as getting the balance right.

Sometimes you will be able to break free from these traps yourself. However, although the notion of getting a balance is simple it's not always so easy to put it into practice. It is not unusual to need support from a healthcare professional. If you feel that this is the case, speak to your GP, a neurologist or a therapist regarding these issues.

My thoughts and action plan, based on the information in this leaflet:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____