



Royal Papworth Hospital
NHS Foundation Trust

Occupational therapy

Energy conservation

Coping with everyday activities
with fatigue or shortness of breath

A patient's guide



Occupational therapy and energy conservation

What is occupational therapy?

Occupational therapy is a healthcare profession offering support to those overcome barriers and enable them to live life to the fullest. Occupational therapists (OTs) help people engage as independently as possible in the activities that enhance their health and wellbeing. This helps to increase people's independence and satisfaction in all areas of life (Royal College of Occupational Therapists, 2024).

How can occupational therapy help you right now?

- To give you strategies to cope with breathlessness and fatigue in everyday tasks.
- Assist you to improve your quality of life and maintain your independence.
- Provide advice and support on techniques and equipment that are specific to your preferences and needs.

What is energy conservation?

Energy conservation is a means to:

- Using your energy wisely.
- Finding an easier way to carry out everyday tasks.
- Getting the most activity done using the least amount of energy.
- Giving you more energy for the activities which are important to you.

Why do I need to conserve my energy?

- To improve your quality of life by having the energy for activities you like to do and not just the mundane everyday tasks.
- To encourage participation in activities you might otherwise avoid, thus increasing your independence and satisfaction with life.
- Energy conservation has been shown to maximise the ability to carry out roles when experiencing chronic fatigue (Taylor and Kielhofner, 2003).
- Staying within an appropriate energy baseline (i.e. avoiding over-exertion and under-exertion) over time has been shown to improve physical functioning and fatigue (Jason et al, 2009).
- The use of energy conservation techniques in COPD patients during activities of daily living has been shown to reduce energy cost (Velloso and Jardim, 2006).

Effects of fatigue

What is fatigue?

Fatigue can be defined as extreme tiredness, weariness or exhaustion, often resulting from mental or physical exertion (e.g. undergoing surgery) or illness. It is a subjective experience which is difficult to define and measure but it is real.

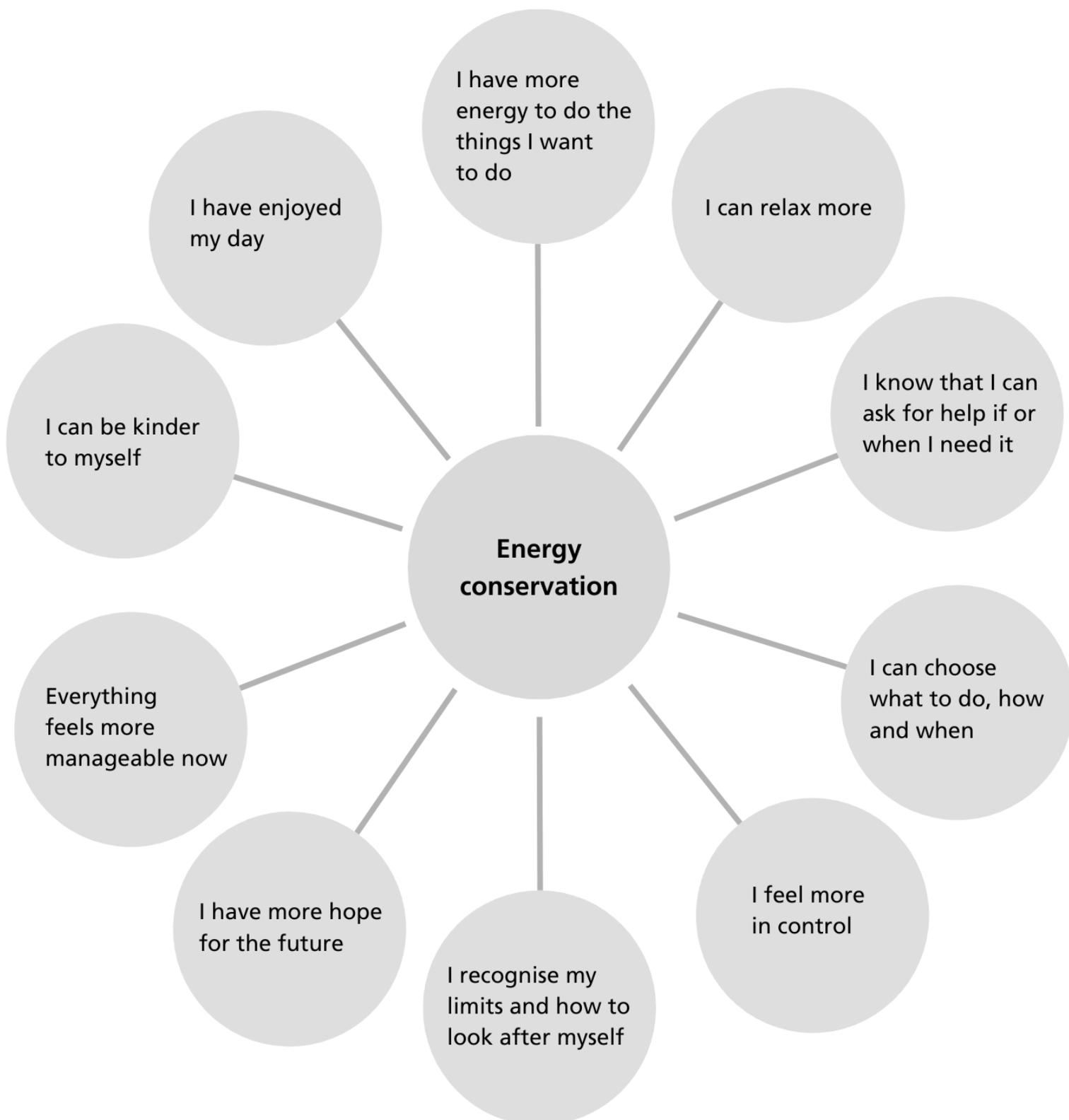
Breathlessness can have similar effects to those shown below for fatigue, and energy conservation can help to relieve both fatigue and breathlessness.



Benefits of energy conservation

Why bother with energy conservation?

Energy conservation can help you to manage fatigue and breathlessness to improve your quality of life. Little adjustments can help you to use your energy more efficiently which in turn can help you to do the things you want to do.



Principles of energy conservation

Prioritising

Prioritising allows you to choose what is most important to you and achieve your own goals. Rather than wasting energy doing things that don't really need to be done by you, you can spend that energy doing the things that make you feel more like you.

- Question what you are doing and how necessary / urgent it is.
- Identify the most important tasks and the activities that are most meaningful to you.
- Set yourself realistic and achievable goals
- See whether you can ask for help with a task, or if the task can be completed by someone else. Friends and family are sometimes able to offer support or choose a professional to do things like gardening or cleaning for you.

Planning

Planning can help you to be in control of what you do and when and ensure that you don't overdo it or waste energy unnecessarily.

- Choose the best time of day for an activity. Notice when and why you have less energy at certain times.
- Break a task down into stages and do things one stage at a time. Consider how much energy is needed for each task.
- Spread activities out over the day and week. Try to get a balance of heavy (high energy) activities, light (low energy) activities and rest.
- Consider timing and movement to reduce unnecessary trips from room to room or up and down the stairs.
- Organise your home and work areas so that items used most frequently are close to hand.
- Eat a well-balanced diet and avoid heavy meals. Excess weight, alcohol and smoking can make fatigue and breathlessness worse.

Pacing

Pacing means slowing things down and spreading things out. Doing something at a slow and steady pace uses less energy, which means you will feel less tired and breathless at the end of it. Pacing self-management has been shown to improve ability to perform daily activities (Nijs et al, 2009) and can improve functional levels (Burley et al, 2007).

- Allow yourself to take regular breaks during your daily activities, and rest after meals.
- Stop before you become overtired.
- Remember you can do half a task today and half tomorrow.
- Try to introduce a routine into your life, including a good night's sleep.
- Try not to rush. It's alright to slow things down and take your time.

Positioning

Positioning relates to your posture as well as your environment. Making small adjustments can mean that you use your energy more efficiently and make activities easier to achieve (Taylor and Kiehlhofner, 2003).

- Sit rather than stand during activities, if possible. Sitting uses 25% less energy than standing.
- Push or slide things rather than lifting them, if possible.
- Push objects rather than pull them.
- Avoid excessive twisting or bending and try to bend at the knees rather than the waist.
- Store things you use often within easy reach.
- Place a seat at the top and bottom of your stairs, if possible.
- Try to maintain good posture. Keeping your chest open and relaxed will help your breathing.

Pursed lip breathing

Pursed lip breathing is a technique that consists of inhaling through the nose with the mouth closed and exhaling through tightly pressed (pursed) lips.

- Slows your breathing down.
- Keeps airways open longer so your lungs can get rid of more stale, trapped air.
- Reduces the work of breathing.
- Increases the amount of time you can exercise or perform an activity.
- Improves the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide.

Try pursed lip breathing when doing activities:

1. Breathe in through your nose (as if you are smelling something) for about two seconds.
2. Pucker your lips like you're getting ready to blow out candles on a birthday cake.
3. Breathe out very slowly through pursed lips, two to three times as long as you breathed in.
4. Repeat.

Putting it into practice

Self-care

- Sit whilst washing, showering, shaving, putting on makeup.
- Use an electric toothbrush/shaver.
- Use equipment in the bath/shower e.g., bath board, shower stool, rails, long-handled sponge.
- Put on a towelling robe immediately after bathing/showering to soak up water rather than using large heavy bath towels.
- Keep the bathroom window/door open to reduce steam.
- Put the cold water first in the bath, then the hot, this reduces steam.
- Avoid using aerosol deodorants, talc, hair spray and strong perfumes.

Dressing

- Sit whilst dressing.
- Use dressing aids to limit bending down e.g. long-handled shoehorn, sock aid.
- If possible, bring your knees/feet up to put on socks, pants, shoes/slippers rather than bending over.
- Choose clothes with front fastenings.

Household cleaning

- Spread the tasks over the week.
- Use appliances that do the work for you.
- Sit whenever possible e.g. use a perching stool whilst ironing.
- Avoid irritants, for example fumes or aerosols, which may trigger feelings of breathlessness.
- Consider having two sets of cleaning items, one for upstairs, one for downstairs.
- Use a trolley to take items from room to room.
- Use a long-handled dustpan and brush.
- Use a cylinder vacuum cleaner rather than an upright vacuum cleaner, thus avoiding pushing and pulling a very heavy appliance around.
- Use fitted sheets and duvets.
- Empty rubbish bins in the house frequently.
- Request an assisted bin collection via the council if required.

Cooking

- Sit down whenever possible e.g. Washing up, preparing vegetables.
- Use light-weight saucepans and cooking containers.
- Use frozen / pre-prepared veg, or convenience meals if easier.
- Make larger portions to freeze for use when you are feeling fatigued or when you are going out later in the day.
- Use a kitchen trolley.
- Use electrical appliances e.g. microwave, blenders, food processors, electric tin opener, dishwashers etc.
- Keep the items you use most regularly close at hand.

Shopping

- Plan your food shopping list by aisles.
- Use a trolley rather than a basket, even for a few items.
- Accept help from the cashier with packing.
- Consider internet shopping/delivery.
- Consider applying for a blue badge to enable you to park closer to the shops.
- Consider the use of a personal shopping trolley around the shops rather than carrying bags, or if applicable a 4 wheeled walker with a built-in seat.
- If you are tired after shopping put the perishable items away first, then rest before finishing the task.

Top tips

- Try to rest before, during and after an activity. Rest before you become too tired / exhausted, and remember that frequent short rest breaks are better than a few long ones.
- Breathing control is important. Try to exhale (breathe out) during the most strenuous part of any activity, for example lifting heavy objects or climbing the stairs. When bending forward, exhale as you bend down and inhale (breathe in) when you come back up.
- Use the least exertion when possible, for example sitting during an activity rather than standing, or sliding rather than lifting objects.
- Try to stay positive and remain engaged in the activities that you enjoy the most, even if you must adapt the activity or the way you engage with it.

If you would like to speak to an occupational therapist whilst in hospital regarding your specific needs, please ask the ward nurse to make a referral.

Useful contacts

Asthma and Lung UK

asthmaandlung.org.uk

Tel: 0300 222 5800

British Heart Foundation

bhf.org.uk

Tel: 03003 303 322

Blue Badge Application

Contact your local social services for details of how to apply.

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