NEWS LESSON

The Work Nobody Sees Can Still Wear You Out



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. When can a day of sitting still leave someone exhausted?
2. What makes your mind feel crowded?
3. Would you rather take a quiet break or do something completely different?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**exertion**	☐	A	large organisations such as schools, hospitals and companies
2	**alters**	☐	B	the way that something works or happens
3	**depletion**	☐	C	using something up until little is left
4	**attribute**	☐	D	continuing for a long time without a break
5	**institutions**	☐	E	changes something, often only slightly
6	**implications**	☐	F	hard physical or mental effort
7	**mechanism**	☐	G	to say that something is caused by something else
8	**sustained**	☐	H	things that may follow from a fact or decision

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

A 2025 imaging study of 28 participants found that after demanding tasks people were less willing to choose harder ones. One small study is not a diagnosis of persistent tiredness.

1 You have been sitting for most of the day, yet choosing dinner feels like one decision too many. The work was not visible in tired legs or heavy lifting. It was in the calls, the concentration and the problems that kept arriving. A day can be demanding without involving much movement.

2 A 2025 study in the Journal of Neuroscience explored how cognitive exertion shapes subsequent choices. Researchers used functional brain imaging while 28 participants completed demanding mental tasks and chose between options involving different levels of effort and reward. Following the fatiguing tasks, participants became less willing to pursue options requiring greater cognitive effort. The findings suggest that fatigue alters how future mental demands are evaluated.

3 That is more nuanced than the popular metaphor of an exhausted brain 'running out of fuel'. The research concerned the interaction between mental exertion and decision-making, not a simple depletion of a fixed daily energy supply. The small sample also limits how broadly its conclusions can be applied. The distinction matters because fatigue is a symptom, not a single diagnosis. Sleep, illness, medication, emotional strain and lifestyle can all contribute, sometimes in overlapping ways.

4 Nevertheless, the experiment connects with experiences of contemporary work. People frequently switch between analytical tasks, emotional interactions and minor administrative decisions. Each activity may appear manageable in isolation, while the cumulative demand can make further concentration unattractive. Stress and uncertainty can add another layer of strain, even without producing obvious physical effort.

5 It would be a mistake, however, to attribute persistent exhaustion automatically to cognitive fatigue. Sleep deprivation, medication, illness and mental health difficulties can cause similar symptoms. When tiredness is severe, unexplained or prolonged, clinical assessment may be appropriate rather than simply experimenting with productivity techniques. Instead of treating every exhausted person as insufficiently disciplined, we might ask what demands they have been carrying and whether the pace of their lives is sustainable.

6 There are implications beyond individual wellbeing. Employers and institutions frequently evaluate effort according to visible hours, completed tasks or physical demands. Cognitive work is harder to observe, and emotionally difficult interactions can be brushed aside as routine if they leave no tangible product. Recognising mental fatigue may therefore require organisations to reconsider scheduling, break policies and the expectation that attention can be sustained indefinitely.

7 At the same time, fatigue should not be used as an all-purpose explanation for persistent symptoms. Its causes are diverse, and the existence of a plausible cognitive mechanism does not rule out illness, medication effects or sleep disorders. A nuanced understanding allows us to take mental demands seriously without converting a single laboratory finding into a universal diagnosis.

8 The wider lesson concerns how we value effort. Better workloads, reasonable boundaries and genuine recovery may matter as much for people doing demanding mental work as they do for those performing physically strenuous jobs.

Sources: Journal of Neuroscience. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The writer suggests that mental work can be undervalued because its effort is hard to see. T F NG
2. The writer treats the small sample as a reason to trust the study's conclusions more. T F NG
3. The participants in the study all worked in offices. T F NG
4. The writer accepts that mental fatigue is real but warns against blaming it for every case of exhaustion. T F NG
5. The writer sees the popular fuel metaphor and the study's conclusions as describing the same thing. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

analytical	contemporary	cumulative	diverse	habitual	plausible	prolonged	subsequent

1. No single request was unreasonable, but their _____ weight, added up over months, became unbearable.
2. Her explanation sounded _____ , yet nobody could find any evidence to support it.
3. After a _____ illness that kept him in bed for several months, he returned to work part-time.
4. The panel was deliberately _____ , including nurses, engineers and an artist.
5. Tired of old photographs, he preferred _____ art that reflected life in the present decade.
6. The first test was easy, but participants found every _____ test harder.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. One small experiment offers little _____ for rewriting an entire company's break policy. **(JUSTIFY)**
2. Persistent tiredness may point to an _____ medical condition rather than a busy schedule. **(UNDERLIE)**
3. Doctors rarely draw a sharp _____ between mental and physical tiredness, since the two overlap. **(DISTINGUISH)**
4. It is wholly _____ to expect anyone to stay alert for ten hours without a proper break. **(REAL)**
5. The _____ of conclusions drawn from only 28 participants is open to question. **(RELY)**

7 Language focus: prepositions

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Some phrases are fixed and cannot be guessed from meaning. Learn each noun or adjective with its preposition.

at	from	in	of	on	to	with

1. Doctors are reluctant to attribute persistent tiredness solely _____ overwork.
2. Each decision looks trivial _____ isolation, yet together they weigh heavily.
3. Symptoms like these are often indicative _____ a deeper problem.
4. Her insistence _____ regular breaks irritated her manager.
5. Many managers are preoccupied _____ visible hours.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. What kind of break helps when you are tired of making decisions?
2. What could a workplace change before telling people to manage stress better?
3. Should feeling tired be enough reason to stop for a while?

9 Role-play: who cooks tonight?

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the tired partner

You've spent the whole day at a desk, answering emails and making decisions. You're exhausted and you don't want to cook or even choose dinner. Ask for help and suggest a simple plan.

Student B · the other partner

You've had a busy day too, and you're hungry. You think sitting down all day isn't really tiring. Ask questions, then agree a fair plan for tonight and for the rest of the week.

Useful phrases

I've had a really long day, and I can't think any more.

I know I've been sitting down, but my head is exhausted.

Could you choose something for dinner tonight?

I'd cook, but I've got no energy left.

How about we share the cooking this week?

That's fair, as long as we're both happy with it.

Afterwards, tell the class: what plan did you agree, and who got the better deal?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 F · 2 E · 3 C · 4 G · 5 A · 6 H · 7 B · 8 D

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 cumulative · 2 plausible · 3 prolonged · 4 diverse · 5 contemporary · 6 subsequent

6 Word forms

1 justification · 2 underlying · 3 distinction · 4 unrealistic · 5 reliability

7 Language focus

1 to · 2 in · 3 of · 4 on · 5 with

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