

Taking Practical Steps

From a lot of research that has been done it's clear that some simple strategies can help. Although we can't make symptoms go away, making some changes in how you manage them, and in how you manage your life, can help you feel a lot better. Here are some things that can help.

1. Have a look at the demands in your life, now and in the recent past. If it feels like too much is going on, are there things that you can cut down on?
2. Look at the things that "lift" you, give you a sense of relaxation, ease or pleasure. Can you make more time for some of them?
3. Pace yourself. Fatigue and pain are both "limiting" symptoms, so don't push too hard against them. Break big tasks into smaller steps, and spread them over a longer period of time. Have a mix of demanding and enjoyable tasks every day.
4. Try and do some gentle physical activity most days. Pain and fatigue might make you feel like stopping activity, but if you do things gently, and in a paced way, it's likely you will feel better in the long run.
5. Spending 5-10 minutes each day practicing a technique like 7/11 breathing can help relax the body and calm the mind. Find a comfortable place where you won't be disturbed, breathe in to the count of 7 and then out to the count of 11. Make sure you breathe in and out through your nose and keep your mouth closed. If you find 7/11 tricky, you can start with breathing in for 3 counts and out for 5.
6. Look at your sleep pattern. Physical symptoms often disturb our sleep, and disturbed sleep can make our symptoms worse. Sorting out your sleep routine could help you feel better.

Talk to your GP about how you might do some of these things. There is also a list of resources below that give you some more advice.

Find out more

The IBS Network www.theibsnetwork.org

The Pain Toolkit www.paintoolkit.org

ME North East www.menortheast.org

Functional Neurology www.neurosymptoms.org

You can find details of local Talking Therapy services on the NHS Choices website www.nhs.uk

What's causing my symptoms?



Doctors cannot always find the reason why we have physical symptoms. Symptoms like pain, fatigue, stomach and bowel problems can have a major impact on our lives, but it is not always clear what causes them. This leaflet describes some factors that may be important.

Experiencing Symptoms

No two people's symptoms are the same and symptoms can change over time. On some days symptoms might be mild and have a limited impact on our daily routine. On other days symptoms may be more pronounced making it difficult to go to work, socialise and plan activities for the future.

"I was working 50 hours a week. I went from 50 hours a week to 24 hours a week to 16 hours a week to nothing. Very fast. The decline happened very quickly, over a course of a couple of years."

An individual with chronic pain and fatigue.

Pain

Pain is usually a signal that there is something wrong, like an internal alarm, drawing our attention to a part of our body. However, pain can also be a "false alarm". Like a car alarm going off in a high wind, or a burglar alarm being triggered by a cat. This pain is just as real as "harm" pain, but it doesn't mean that there is something wrong. Pain is also whatever our brain tells us is painful. In people who have had pain for a long time, the brain seems to interpret signals from the rest of the body as painful that would previously have been ignored.

None of this means that the pain isn't real.

Fatigue

Like pain, fatigue is a signal from our body. Fatigue means, "slow down" or "stop". That's why it accompanies so many illnesses: it's our bodies' way of making us slow down and recover. Fatigue can also go on for a long time after we have otherwise recovered from illness. Energy levels can take much longer than we expect to get back to normal.

Many other things can also trigger fatigue. Being over-stretched, having too many things to cope with can also make us fatigued. This is particularly the case if this increased "demand" goes on for a long time.

Fatigue can also become a vicious circle: the more tired we are the less we do; the less we do, the more tired we get.

Symptoms are real

It's very common not to be able to find an obvious cause for them.

This can be frustrating for both doctors and patients.

Other Symptoms

Stomach pains and altered bowel habits (constipation, diarrhoea, bloating and wind) are other common symptoms that can be troubling but not be linked to any obvious cause. Food makes a very long journey through our body, and things can change at any point on that journey. It's still not clear why. It can happen after a stomach bug, or when other things in our life have thrown our bodies out of rhythm.

What to Expect From Your GP

First of all, it's important to rule out any other causes of your symptoms. Some of the tests your GP may order are designed to show if a system in your body, for example your liver, thyroid or kidney is damaged or inflamed. These tests can't always tell us how well a system is working, or how often it is working properly. If you are one of the many for whom the test result is normal, then it may be worth discussing what the next steps are with your GP.

"If I'm right, the test will be negative, because you can't spot things not functioning, you can only see where things are damaged. It's like a still photograph of a movie, you can't tell where things are happening".

A GP describing why tests are being ordered.

"I'd been a hard worker and I was having problems and this – for a GP to turn around and say to somebody who could work so hard, that there's nothing wrong with you?" *An individual with chronic pain.*

"So they carried out all these expensive, time-consuming tests and investigations to have each of the tests come back 'they're fine, they're fine, they're fine'"

An individual with chronic fatigue.