

# Coping with CFS

## GUIDELINES FOR CFS PATIENTS

### Common challenges

Living with chronic fatigue syndrome can be difficult. Feelings of anger, guilt, anxiety, isolation and abandonment are common in CFS patients. While it's normal to have such feelings, unresolved emotions and stress can make symptoms worse, interfere with pharmacological therapies and make recovery harder. It's important for patients to acknowledge the life-altering changes imposed by their illness and to develop effective coping strategies to deal with these changes.

Like other debilitating chronic illnesses, CFS can have a profound impact on daily life, requiring patients to make significant lifestyle changes and adapt to a series of new limitations. Common difficulties for CFS patients include problems coping with:

- the severe, changing and unpredictable symptoms
- a decrease in stamina that interferes with activities of daily living
- memory and concentration problems that seriously impact work or school performance
- an uncertain prognosis that makes it hard to plan for the future
- loss of independence, livelihood and economic security
- alterations in relationships with family and friends
- worries about bearing and raising children
- concerns about the potential impact of decreased sexual activity on intimate relationships
- skepticism and misconceptions about the illness

### Professional counseling

Consulting a mental health professional may help some patients build effective coping skills. A supportive counselor can help you cope with the prospects of long-term illness, as well as the emotions that often accompany chronic illness. A competent therapist can use problem-solving techniques and standard psychotherapy and counseling methods to help you work through these issues. In some cases, a therapist may recommend a combination of medication and psychotherapy.

Because chronic illnesses like CFS impact the entire family, not just the patient, you may want to consider family education and counseling. Consulting a behavioral health provider may help you address changes in family dynamics related to living with CFS.

### Alternative therapies

Deep breathing and muscle relaxation techniques, massage and healing touch, and movement therapies like stretching, yoga and tai chi can be beneficial for some CFS patients in reducing anxiety and promoting a sense of well-being.

Be sure to discuss all potential alternative therapies with your health care professional since many so-called cures and treatments for CFS that are promoted on the Internet and in books are unproven and could be dangerous.

### Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)

Cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT, is often prescribed to help chronically ill patients cope with illness and develop behaviors and strategies that help alleviate symptoms. It has been successful in helping patients with cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer, and recent studies indicate that CBT can be useful in treating some CFS patients.

While CBT is frequently prescribed as a coping strategy, it can also help patients learn to manage activity levels, stress and symptoms. Optimally, CBT can help you better adapt to the impact of CFS and improve your level of function and quality of life. However, it's not a cure.

### Support groups

Many people with CFS find it therapeutic to meet with other people who have this illness. People with CFS often feel alone with their disease and with the everyday struggles this illness brings to them and to family members and friends. Support groups ease the transition for the newly diagnosed patient and provide essential emotional support in the ongoing struggle with the disease. A support group can give you a greater sense of self-esteem and empowerment as you learn to cope and adapt to life with a chronic illness.

Support groups can also provide patients with useful, current information on CFS and offer tips for living with such a debilitating chronic illness. Support groups also provide a forum for discussion of new research and treatment options.