

## MARIA CONNOR

### The Long Search for Help

Late afternoon is often when 43-year-old Maria Connor feels the worst. Fatigue. Headaches. Weakness. Muscle aches. Pain that would be numbing if it didn't hurt so much.

But this is also the time of day when her three children—ages 11, 13 and 14—come home from school in New Albany, Ohio. “You just have to put on a happy face and do the best you can,” she says.

They were too young when Maria got sick to have many memories of her as the healthy woman she used to be—a competitive tennis player with three college degrees who put her career as a speech-language pathologist on hold to be a stay-at-home mom.

The onslaught of symptoms hit 10 years ago, but Maria thought her sore throat, headaches, muscle pain and weakness were related to strep throat. She'd had it three times in less than a year. Her doctor suggested she was in a phase, a worn-out young mother with three young children, and life probably just seemed overwhelming.

“It was usually a shoulder-shrug kind of attitude,” Maria remembers of those early doctor visits. “I'd return time after time and say, ‘I've had six sore throats’ or ‘I'm constantly exhausted.’ There was just never an answer.” A tonsillectomy offered some relief, but then came extreme abdominal pains and high fevers that “no one could diagnose. There was nothing done,” she says.

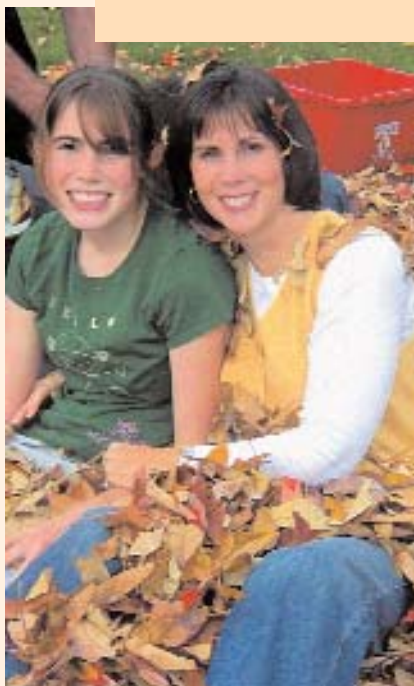
She got pregnant again, but miscarried in the second month. She suffered more flu-like symptoms, along with postpartum depression. Still, doctors had no answers. “I had a hard time because the illness wasn't diagnosed, and it was so pressing in my life,” she says. “I felt like maybe I had a character flaw, that maybe I was weak or lazy. After all, the doctors couldn't find anything wrong.”

After five years, Maria received a CFS diagnosis from the Cleveland Clinic. “The most devastating thing that happened with the diagnosis is there was nothing else to go with it,” she says. “No brochure. No ‘Here's where to read up about it.’ No ‘Here's a support group in your area.’ I think that's a huge issue with this illness. Doctors don't direct patients to information.”

She was reminded of this again last winter when she was the sickest she'd ever been. Her symptoms were compounded by uncontrollable twitching and a pain level of “10 out of 10.” She was hospitalized for five days while doctors tried to determine if she'd had a stroke or was suffering from multiple sclerosis.

“The end result was, ‘You don't have MS. You didn't have a stroke,’” she says. “If I'd had MS or a stroke, I would've left that hospital with some kind of follow-up. I left the hospital with the same symptoms as someone with MS or a stroke, but I was treated differently because I don't have a label doctors take seriously!”

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Her health is better now, thanks in part to Dr. Larry Everhart, a naturopath, and the whole-health treatments he's recommended. Maria has adopted a gluten-free diet and avoids foods with preservatives. She's starting massage therapy and learning more about healing-touch therapies. She's seeing a chiropractor. And she's discovering the power of prayer. Each of these has brought “another layer of improvement,” and she says her pain has gone from a “level 10 to a level 2.” Her digestive system is “working better,” and she's not “tremoring” as much.

“It's like peeling back layers,” Maria explains. “Now that I've found these things, I want to help other people find them too. Because 10 years is too long to struggle to find this kind of help.”