

STRESS AS A CATALYST FOR ILLNESS

“Stress” is experienced when a person perceives that the demands made upon her exceed the mental, physical, personal, or social resources she is able to mobilize.

Most of us can handle the ups and downs of our daily lives, even the occasional catastrophe. We dig in our heels, persevere, and eventually learn to cope. However, some individuals have an altered stress-coping system, which prevents them from managing daily stress. Human studies suggest that for some folks, the cumulative effects of physical, mental, chemical, or emotional burdens in early childhood may increase the affects of stress later in life. (It’s possible that the reason for his effect is an overstimulation or dysfunction of the HPA-axis). Retrospective studies show that the stress of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse during childhood also increases the future risk of developing certain symptoms, including many associated with FMS and CFS.

Apparently, for some children and adolescents, too many traumatic or stressful events decondition their normal homeostatic stress-coping abilities. Thus stress, particularly traumatic stress, early in life may alter the set point of their stress-response system. As they get older, have more responsibilities, and experience an increase in their daily stress, they often find their health beginning to suffer. They may start to have bouts of anxiety and depression, or perhaps they’re just tired all the time. They become extremely vulnerable to major stressors: the death of a loved one, chronic illness, invasive surgery, physical trauma, etc. Like a ticking time bomb, it’s only a matter of time before they explode.

This is especially true for those who have a genetic predisposition that makes them more susceptible to the ill effects of daily stress,

including reduced serotonin levels. Some research has suggested that FMS/CFS patients may in fact be afflicted by this genetic abnormality.

Sadly, I find that many of my FMS and CFS patients have experienced physical, emotional, or sexual abuse as a child. Some patients report abuse from their spouse (sometimes physical but more often emotional). This stressful situation, though begun in adulthood, can still eventually deplete their stress-coping chemicals and lead to a state of disease.

The symptoms of fatigue, pain, poor sleep, poor digestion, irregular bowel movements, mental confusion, poor memory, anxiety, and depression are all warning signs that certain stress-coping chemicals (including vitamins, minerals, amino acids, essential fatty acids, and hormones) have become deficient. These deficiencies then complicate one another until the body's homeostatic mechanism and HPA-axis become dysfunctional.

The final tick of the time bomb may be just another part of chronic daily stress, or it may be a sudden traumatic event like the birth of a new baby. I know I didn't think I'd survive the first colic-plagued six months of my daughter's life. And I'm extremely healthy! I pulled my weight and spent every other night walking and rocking my crying daughter into the early morning, and this is main reason it took another nine years before my wife could convince me to have another child!

It's no wonder that many of my patients report that their fibromyalgia began after the birth of a child, often a firstborn. Anyone with children can relate to sleeping (if you can call it that) with one eye and two ears open, making sure the baby is breathing. Or how about trying to sleep without moving so that you don't wake the baby up? Then there's the endless nights of breast and bottle feedings, diaper changes at two in the morning, and the early morning piercing cry: "I'm awake, folks!" It's enough to bankrupt anyone's stress-coping savings account! Whew! Let's move on.

I want you to read about some people who really understand what you're going through. These are edited accounts from real people,

though their names have been changed. (You can read more testimonials in chapter 2.) See if you can find yourself in their stories. I pray that you will also soon find yourself in their recoveries.

TYPE A: THE DRIVER

I've found that most of my FMS and CFS patients fall into one of two personality types: A or B. A's are the driven perfectionists; they do, do, do, until they're done out. B's are the caregivers; they give, give, give, until they're given out.

Type A's have a schedule filled with activities, which may include a full-time job (which could be staying at home with kids), household duties, family responsibilities, soccer practices, PTA meetings, volunteer work, church duties, and more. They push themselves harder and harder trying to do more, be more, have more. They don't want to settle for second best. These perfectionist can't stand to be idle. They must be busy doing something, and they love to multitask. They'll be talking on the phone counseling a co-worker, cooking dinner, emptying the dishwasher, feeding the baby, and looking over the day's mail all at the same time. They're used to pushing themselves and often feel guilty asking for extra pay or time off, even though they perform above and beyond their call. If asked to volunteer for a good cause, they nearly always accept. If the boss calls and asks them to head an additional committee, they accept once again. "No" is a rare word in their vocabulary.

Unfortunately, these type A's can get so caught up in "doing" that they never take time to be human "beings." They don't know what true downtime feels like. Finally, the years of constant stress catch up to them, and they literally burn themselves out.

JEAN

I'm 59 years old, and I work as an insurance agent. Until 12 years ago, I had been very active in sports. I've raised three boys, mostly on my own, and I've always been involved in the community.

I had to have surgery, and from there went downhill. Very sick, no energy, lots of pain. Over the next three years, I went through eight

doctors and finally found one who put a name to it: fibromyalgia. I read every book that I could find on the subject, trying to find out what caused it and what to do for it. I saw two rheumatologists who told me there was nothing to do for it and it was just something that I was going to have to live with. I had decided that they were right.

There were times that I'd go for weeks and feel really bad and then a period of time where I wouldn't feel so bad. Then about three years ago I got real sick and stayed in bed for several weeks. I couldn't get out of bed, put on my own clothes, cook, or anything. I had always done everything for my sons. And now I was needing them to help take care of me! It was terrible. I was very frustrated.

My doc had put me on antidepressants, pain meds, anything to give me some relief. I know that he was trying to help, but I had reached a point to where I was not sleeping. Two hours a night maybe. Sometimes two or three days with no sleep. I was weak and tired, but my brain was racing 90 miles an hour. I started realizing that the worse I felt, I could not remember things, even things that had just happened. My fibro-fog was bad.

Then I found out about Dr. Murphree by accident from my Sunday school teacher who had seen an article in the paper about a seminar, but at that point, I was too sick to attend. But I looked up his office and got in to see them the very next day. When I read his book, I knew that this was my life story. Everything that he was talking about was me and all that I had gone through. I had been on vitamins off-and-on for a long time and just finally gave up because they did not seem to be doing any good. In reading his book and taking the supplements that he recommended, it made all the difference in the world.

I am now sleeping six to eight hours or more a night; the pain is so much better. I do occasionally have a flare-up, especially if I have a cold, but it doesn't last nearly as long as it used to. Since I have been on the supplements, I mentally, physically, and emotionally, feel so much better. I would highly recommend that anyone read his book. It has so much information as to what you need to do with your health. My coming to the clinic has been very beneficial. The heat therapy and re-alignment has helped me so much.

I also think that Dr. Murphree's approach is the most important thing. He tries to get to the root of the problem and doesn't just give you drugs, or try a lot of different therapies, or try to cover it up. Each body is different and needs different supplements, and he's willing to work with you to get the right ones. I would say on a scale from 0 to 10 that my pain is at a 2. Compared to where I was, that's great improvement.

MAUDY

I've finally learned that I don't have to be the best at everything. My parents always wanted me to be the best that I could be, which is good in a way, but it can really get out of hand. So I graduated from college in three years with honors and immediately began my dream job in advertising. My first year out of college I met my husband, got married, and we wanted to have children right away. We have three children now—two boys and a girl. Mathew, Michael, and Rachal are all about two years apart. I worked up until delivery and took only a month off for each child. I worked full-time, and really more than full-time.

Matt's work requires him to travel several days a month, which can be tough on us. But for the first 10 years, we were doing well. I know that Matt likes his job, and I had had several pay increases, and we both liked to serve on community volunteer boards. Our kids are into soccer, baseball, and basketball, and we tried to make all their games. We also were having a lot of dinner parties for clients. And I was taking some Spanish classes for work. And Matt was working towards his master's.

I would be lying if I said that I didn't love the success we were enjoying. We had a large home we loved, two luxury cars, a lakehouse, happy kids in private school, and I was definitely on track to make VP at the firm.

But one day the bottom just sort of fell out, and my life became unmanageable. My husband starting spending more and more time away on business, Michael was diagnosed with a learning disability, my mother died of a long illness with emphysema, I really had more work than I could handle at the firm, and my health started to suffer. At first it was colds that hung around and wouldn't easily go away. Then I started chronic headaches. Some days I had to drag myself through the day living on coffee. My boss even mentioned that I was yawning all the time. I was so embarrassed.

At first I thought I was just tired and needed a rest, so my husband and I took our first extended vacation—four days—away from our children. I felt a little better when we returned and jumped right back into my old routine. There was always so much to do when I got home from work. Some nights I didn't get in bed until early the next morning. Then I'd be blasted by my alarm clock at 5:30 a.m. I'd get up and immediately start getting breakfast ready for the kids.

One day I just couldn't get out of bed. The alarm clock went off but I couldn't even make myself get out of bed to turn it off. Instead it continued to buzz until finally, half an hour later, my son Mathew came into my room and turned it off.

I made an appointment with our family doctor who ran a bunch of tests. He said they didn't show anything was wrong, but maybe I was depressed from the death of my mother and recommended I take an antidepressant. I knew something must be wrong so I started taking the medicine and thought it would get me back on track again. It didn't. I went to doctor after doctor trying to find someone to help me. I continued to get worse with headaches, irritable bowel problems, insomnia, sinus infections that wouldn't go away. I felt like I had the worst case of the flu, 24 hours a day.

I hated taking sick days from work. I was always the one who never did. But I started missing several days of work each month. And I felt like I lived at the doctor's office. I honestly saw 12 doctors about this, but I continued to get worse. My mind seemed to turn to mush. Even the simplest decisions became a big ordeal. I couldn't remember where I put my car keys; had I taken my medicine; what was I supposed to pick up at the store?

My friends were sweet, but I just stopped communicating with them. And the thought of a dinner party just made me want to cry. So I really had no social life anymore. I didn't have the energy to walk the dog. And I couldn't stand sitting in the bleachers at games. They were just too hard on my back. When I was still working, I'd be in bed by nine, sometimes as early as 7:30. Of course I couldn't sleep but dozed off only to wake up in pain.

I had to take an early retirement from my job. I had run out of sick

days, and it was getting pretty pathetic at work. I was losing everything I had worked for. My marriage was becoming strained, and our finances were dwindling due to all the doctor bills, prescriptions, tests, and the huge increase in health insurance once I retired.

I read an article about Dr. Murphree and his fibromyalgia program. I had run out of options and felt that he was my last hope and told him so. I started the program and faithfully did all the therapies recommended by the doctors at the clinic. The first thing that improved was my sleep. I finally began to sleep through the night or least get five hours of what Dr. Murphree called “restorative” sleep. I was able to discontinue my sleep medicines. I was glad to be off these drugs, which left me feeling hung over the next morning. I started to feel better. I had more energy. The pain slowly but steadily became tolerable and continues to be manageable unless I overdo it.

I think the vitamin formulas have made a huge difference. If I forget to take them for a few days, the pain and fatigue start to return. I’m not 100% better, but I’m getting my life back. I now have a social life again. I’m even thinking about going back to work part-time. But I won’t try to be the best at everything!

JULIE

I played tennis and golf and was a cheerleader in college. After college, I got married and started my career. I remember coming down with the most terrible case of the flu and not being able to shake it.

I was prescribed antibiotics and bed rest. I stayed home for three sick days, but I was just exhausted, and every muscle in my body hurt. I managed to go back to work, but I still felt terrible and would have to go right to bed when I got home after work. I would just walk in the door and walk straight to my room. Sometimes I’d climb in bed with my shoes on! I went back to my family doctor, and he did dozens of tests over a period of two months. Nothing showed up on my lab work. No matter what I tried—drugs, vitamins, exercise, rest—nothing helped for long. I just couldn’t shake it. My family doctor said he thought I was exhausted and needed a vacation. He asked me if my husband was abusing me. That was definitely not the case, but it got me thinking that maybe I was very stressed out.

I took some time off, went to the beach, and lay on the beach for a week. I still felt exhausted and couldn't shake the nagging muscle pains. I couldn't sleep because of the pain. I returned to my doctor who said he thought I should try a new antidepressant and come back in a month. The antidepressant didn't seem to help and I was now starting to get tingling in my right arm and hand. I was referred to a neurologist who said I may have some nerve damage in my arm. The neurologist prescribed Neurontin and recommended I see an orthopedic surgeon. The orthopedic surgeon said my MRI was negative and recommended more drugs.

I was getting worse and started to miss a good deal of work. My social life had gotten pretty awkward. My marriage was being strained from the stress of almost a year of poor health. I mean I couldn't even take the trash out to the curb without becoming totally exhausted. I couldn't sleep, no matter what medicines were prescribed: muscle relaxers, tranquilizers, antidepressants, whatever. They made me tired, but I didn't really sleep. It seemed like my family doctor resented that I was not any better. He referred me to a rheumatologist and told me that there was really nothing more that he could do for me.

The rheumatologist ordered dozens more tests, all of which came back normal. He then told me I had fibromyalgia. I had never heard of it. He explained what it was. He said they weren't sure what caused it and that there was very little that could be done for it. Most of what he recommended I'd either tried or was already on. He did recommend exercise, which was new, but I just couldn't bring myself to even start. Just putting on my sports bra was actually exhausting. I did feel relieved to know I wasn't crazy or just making these things up. Someone had finally found out what was the matter with me.

The rheumatologist prescribed lots of drugs and also physical therapy. At first I seemed to be a little better. After a couple of weeks I started getting terrible stomach pains. The doctor said it was probably due to the Celebrex, so I stopped taking it. Then I started having more and more trouble just waking up in the morning. And so I stopped Zanaflex and started Ambien. This definitely helped, and I didn't feel so hung over in the morning. My pain continued to be as bad, though, and I was given trigger-point injections. These didn't help and sometimes made me hurt

like crazy. After a couple of months, the Ambien stopped working and I couldn't get to sleep once again. I stopped going to the physical therapist, because some of that also seemed to make me worse. I think it was just too intense.

I read book after book on fibromyalgia and decided that I needed to try a more natural approach. So I started taking various supplements and watching my diet a little closer. I stopped all caffeine, sodas, and alcohol. This was hard to do, but it seemed to help. Massage therapy worked some. And I started seeing a chiropractor and an acupuncturist: two things I never would have even thought of doing before. The relief was short-term, and I had to go a lot. I just couldn't afford it after a while. And it was hard to tell what exactly was working, because I was trying all this alternative stuff at the same time.

One day I was watching the news when they started talking about a local clinic that specialized in fibromyalgia. I went to a talk and realized everything Dr. Murphree said about my illness was true. I just wanted to cry. I felt hope inside me rising up again.

I began the program in October, and by January I was back at work. I still don't have the stamina I once did, but I don't pass out from exhaustion and pain at the end of the day. I know I'll always need to monitor my stress, eat right, and take the supplements Dr. Murphree recommends. When I try to do too much, I'm reminded that I have fibromyalgia. Otherwise I feel good most all the time.

TYPE B: THE CAREGIVER

Type Bs may or may not be as driven as type A's, but they are just as taxed. They spend considerable time and energy taking care of spouses, children, extended family, and friends. Their lives revolve around the ups and downs and daily challenges of those they look after. They may have an invalid living in their home. They may be continuously running back and forth between the hospital and nursing home. Or they may just see it as their duty to especially care for those around them, even those who don't ask for help. And since they don't have enough time in the day to take care of the needy and themselves, they often struggle late into the night to get everything done.

They like to be needed (don't we all?) and feel a sense of duty that makes them continue to give more. They can spend years giving and giving while getting little in return and leaving no time for themselves. This constant emotional strain can certainly take its toll on a marriage. They are often too tired to simply enjoy time with their spouse, who usually gets pushed to the bottom of the priority list (right above them- selves, that is). Finally—and it's inevitable—these individuals either change dramatically, or they crash.

VICKY

I heard about the clinic from a friend of the family. I figured I had nothing to lose at this point. I called and got the first available appointment, and three weeks later I drove seven hours to be seen. The best thing about my visit was knowing I wasn't crazy. There were other patients from all over the country who had the same symptoms as I did. We couldn't all be crazy. The doctors took my history, examined me, and then explained why I felt as I did. They said they'd need to do some more tests but were pretty certain I had chronic fatigue syndrome. I'd never heard of it, but after they began to explain it, everything started to add up.

They asked, When have you last really felt good? It was probably about six years ago. That's when I had started getting chronic sinus infections. I was treated with cortisone shots and antibiotics. I'd have four or five infections a year. No matter how many shots or pills I'd take, they'd hang on for weeks at a time. Each time I'd take antibiotics, I'd get a raging yeast infection. I'd started having lots of stomach problems, bloating, gas, and pain. Two years ago, I developed pneumonia and was hospitalized.

The doctor at the clinic also asked what happened about six years ago. I hadn't really thought about, it but I'd been under a tremendous amount of stress. My mother had died and then my father had a stroke. He came to live with us and needed around-the-clock attention. I couldn't leave him but for a few hours at a time. My husband tried to get me to hire full- time sitters, but I just couldn't bring myself to do that. I know that's not what mom would have wanted for dad. We were in and out of the hospital many times, but dad always managed

to pull through. My teenage daughter had a bad car accident, so she too was in and out of doctors offices for over a year.

I never seemed to get better from then on, and I was totally exhausted. I couldn't even go to the grocery store without being wiped out for days. I never got up earlier than 11 o'clock. I drank a pot of coffee and several Diet Cokes just to make it through the day. I had a CAT scan, MRIs, nerve tests, and tons of blood tests. All my tests came back pretty normal, though they did discover some heart irregularities. I was beginning to think I was just crazy; I know my family already thought so.

I tried to be a good wife, mother, and daughter. I kept the house clean, took care of my husband, father, and children. I would have to get up several times a night to check on dad. Sometimes, I was just too tired to go back to sleep. I'd stay awake and enjoy what little free time I could. I'd make sure everyone got their break-fast and was off to school or work on time.

Some days I felt like I was a hundred years old. My father died, and then there was the funeral and the estate to look after. I got through this and was actually looking forward to getting my life back when I my chronic sinus infections turned into pneumonia. I was never the same after that. I've been sick every day now for at least five years.

Dr. Murphree told me I had chronic fatigue syndrome. He explained how my autonomic nervous system had been overwhelmed by the years of chronic stress. My immune system had stopped working like it should. I was placed on an elimination diet, supplements, and some prescription medications.

I didn't notice much improvement, and after two weeks, I started becoming discouraged once again. Then something seemed to change. One day I woke up with more energy than I'd had in years. I felt almost normal. Unfortunately it didn't last but for one or two days. Each week, though, I seem to be getting stronger, feeling better.

JEANETTE

I've been a nurse for over 20 years. I'm the head nurse for the critical care unit at a large hospital. I'm responsible for overseeing dozens of nurses, nursing aids, and medical technologists. We have the sickest

of the sick patients, but I enjoy my work. It's demanding, stressful, but rewarding. Many of our patients don't make it out of CCU. The constant threat of death is too much for some nurses who rotate through the department. Sometimes you'll get close to a patient and their family only to watch them die.

Until last year, I thought I'd be happy to stay in this position for another 20 years. But now I can't seem to muster up the energy needed to sustain me through the day. It seems I've lost something; I don't know what. I'm sick a lot. I feel like I've got some infection just underneath the surface that just won't go away. None of the doctors I've seen can tell me what's wrong with me. I'm on several medications but don't feel any better. I wonder if I'll ever be healthy again. But I'm willing to try your plan, Dr. Murphree. What can I lose?

FOR FURTHER READING AND RESEARCH

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