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M.E. - A GUIDE FOR YOUNG SUFFERERS

If you've just been told that you have M.E., I would guess that your immediate reaction is one of two feelings. You may be relieved, perhaps even pleased, that at last a 'label' has been put on your illness. Perhaps for some time you have known, deep down that you have a real illness, but found that your friends, relatives, and maybe even your doctor have given the impression to you that they think you're not really ill, but depressed or trying to avoid school or college. Now that a real illness has been diagnosed, you should be taken more seriously. People will realise that you're depressed and fed up because you're ill (who wouldn't be with the symptoms M. E. causes) not the other way round, ill because you're depressed.

Perhaps also, though, your relief is mixed with some worries. You may have heard of patients who have M.E. for years, and are severely handicapped by it. You may feel that you're never going to get better.

Let me first say, as encouragement, that time is on your side. Experience shows that the younger you are, and the shorter time you've had M.E., the better your chances for a quick and complete recovery. Also remember that a large number of patients with M.E. get better without any treatment. Treatment can certainly help the rest.

The main treatment that 'proper' doctors - like your G.P. - have to offer is anti-depressant drugs. You may feel - quite rightly - that this is wrong. It's not dealing with what you know is the basic problem. Nevertheless they can help restore your sleep pattern - and in doing so improve your daytime energy. Antidepressants are not a 'cure' for M.E., but they may help.

Unfortunately, as yet, there is no one cure for M.E. But there are several treatments which help. The difficulty is that different patients with M.E. have different problems. The secret with treatment is to find out the problems affecting you and cope with each separately. The problems - and the way to cope with them - are:

1 Persistent infection

Sometimes the bodies defences - the immune system - is unable to cope with an infection, and so it stays in the body. This results in a perpetual 'flu' feeling, with swollen glands, sore throats and an occasional temperature. Antibiotics won't help, as usually it's a virus causing this and antibiotics have no effect on viruses (in fact they may make M.E. worse). High doses of vitamin C together with the right homoeopathic medicine may help the immune system to deal with the problem.

2 Yeast Overgrowth

Some patients with M.E. - probably over half - have too many yeast 'bugs' in their intestine. We all have some, as well as bacteria which help digestion. But if the yeast bugs predominate you get wind, diarrhoea, and swelling of the tummy. Often you also crave sweet things (particularly chocolate). To see if this is part of your problem stop all yeast and sugar in your diet for a week or so. If you feel better, you'll probably need some medicine to kill off the yeasts.

3 Magnesium

Some research has shown that people with M.E. have low magnesium in their bodies. Magnesium is something which we all need, and usually get enough of from our diet. Lots of chemical reactions in the body need magnesium, but particularly the one which produces energy in the muscles. So one of the main signs of magnesium deficiency is weakness of the muscles. A simple blood test can show if your magnesium is low. But unfortunately if it is low, taking magnesium tablets doesn't work. Something seems to stop magnesium getting into the system from the intestine (it may be the yeast overgrowth which 'grabs' all the magnesium in the food - leaving little for you). So the magnesium has to be given in a way which by-passes the intestine. There are two ways in which this can be done; either by giving injections - about once a week - or by diluting the magnesium in some other liquid and, through a small tube, putting it slowly into a vein in the arm. The second way doesn't cause any pain as the skin over where the tube is inserted can be made numb.

4 Evening Primrose Oil

Only two treatments have been proven to be effective in M.E. The first is magnesium and the other oil of evening primrose, which seems more effective when mixed with fish oils. This can be bought from a good health food store without prescription, and so is a good 'do-it-yourself' initial treatment to try.

5 Allergies

Often there are allergies in M.E. in that there are reactions to foods, chemicals, animals or other substances in the environment. If you notice that you are worse when in a particular place or after eating or drinking something this may be part of your problem. If this is something in your diet it's quite easy to avoid. But if it's something you can't avoid - such as traffic fumes - you may need to be desensitised using homoeopathic medicine.

There are one or two rarer problems which can cause the persistence of problems in M.E., but these cover the most common approaches.

You will get different advice about what to do physically. Some doctors will tell you to rest all the time, whereas others will encourage a program of activity. The truth is somewhere in between. Do as much as you feel able to, with the following advice in mind.

One word of warning. When you improve (note that I say when, not if) you will overdo things. Everyone does. Because you feel better you will want to do more than you can. This is because the brain gets better more quickly than the body, and you consequently think you can do more than you can. Apply the 3/4 rule:

As you get better do three quarters, in time or distance, of what you **think** you can do. So if you feel you can go for a twenty minute walk **stop after fifteen minutes**. In this way, rather than being shattered afterwards (as you would have been if you did twenty minutes) you'll find that slowly your capacity will improve. Fairly soon you will be able to do twenty minutes, because you feel you can do thirty.

Overall bear in mind that you will get better - and treatment may speed this up. A positive attitude, with determination that M.E. will not beat you can alone help enormously.