

INFORMATION SHEET 3.1

Stress, anxiety and chronic fatigue – practical strategies

Stress and anxiety are common symptoms for people with fatigue conditions. Reducing stress and anxiety increases the healing capacity of the body, and so skills for lowering stress levels are vital to recovery.

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Recovery from ME and chronic fatigue is only possible when stress levels have reduced enough for the body to access its healing state. The body's response to stress underlies many of the symptoms common to people with chronic fatigue conditions. These may include sleeping problems (waking early, difficulty getting to sleep and unrestful sleep), digestive issues (such as diarrhoea or IBS-type symptoms), muscle pain and tension (especially neck and jaw pain) as well as feeling overwhelmed, and some bouts of fatigue that have sudden onset (sometimes called 'crashing'). It is worth remembering that chronic illness is stressful in itself, and a prolonged period of the body being in a stressed state can mean that many of these symptoms are accumulated over months or years living with a fatigue condition.

Anyone who has ME, or similar fatigue conditions, will already have useful coping strategies in place to help manage the emotional and physical aspects of the condition. However, for almost all people with fatigue conditions, new ways of managing stress, together with a refreshing of old skills, are essential to recovery. Skills and techniques to change from a stress state to a relaxed, healing state, are central to many approaches used in the treatment of fatigue conditions, such as the Lightning Process or related NLP approaches.

For many people, a period of chronic stress preceded the onset of condition, particularly post-viral fatigue. If this is the case, recovery can be a tough learning course for all the skills and strategies needed to better manage life's stresses. For others, unresolved traumatic experiences were a trigger or a predisposing factor for the fatigue condition.

But whatever triggered the onset, the physiological state of someone with a fatigue condition appears to be quite similar to someone with post-traumatic stress. This is perhaps why self-help tools and therapeutic approaches used in the treatment of post-traumatic stress can be very helpful for

fatigue conditions. Some of these tools and insights have been included in this information sheet.

This information sheet introduces various approaches and self-care strategies and tools that I, or my clients (included with their permission) have found helpful in lowering stress levels so that healing can happen. Quite often, I introduce some of

these approaches as part of a craniosacral session. If you feel that something described here may be helpful to you and you would like more explanation, please ask me during a session. If you have found other things helpful that I haven't described here, please do let me know, so that I can add the information. Two other information sheets; *1. Supporting yourself through recovery* and *2. Pacing*, are also referred to in this one.

Managing stress levels and developing body awareness

By learning to track and manage your stress levels, you can make sure you are in a relaxed, healing state as much as possible. This means learning how to listen to your stress levels, so you can hear when you are reaching your limits and pace what you do. (See the information sheet on *Pacing*.)

As with anything, awareness is the first step in being able to make changes. Once you are aware of your stress levels, you can use strategies and tools for managing and lowering stress levels, such as those outlined here. Tracking stress levels effectively will probably mean becoming more aware of your body. However, when starting to listen to body sensations, people with fatigue conditions commonly find the first thing they notice is a state of anxiety or fear, physical pain or numbness. The difficult feelings and sensations associated with these states mean that developing body awareness can be a challenging process, and at first, sensations may seem quite confusing and hard to distinguish from each other.

Developing body awareness must be done slowly, with a focus on remaining in your comfort zone. The best way to begin listening to your body is to take time to notice the areas that feel comfortable. If you try just one thing from this information sheet try this. It tends to be naturally calming, because the body responds well to being heard, and because as long as you are in touch with a part of you that feels OK, no situation is experienced as overwhelming. Focusing on these kind of pleasant sensations can also be an effective pain-management practice. This skill is also the first step towards *dual awareness* described later in this information sheet.

Exercise:

Gently scan your body with your awareness until you find a part of you that feels OK right now – perhaps somewhere that feels most comfortable in some way, at ease or more relaxed. (This can be an area as small as the tip of your nose, or much larger.) Describe to yourself exactly where it is, what shape it is, and what sensations, textures, colours or qualities are in this area. Spend time really getting to know this place, and rest there.

Therapeutic approaches to lowering stress levels

While psychological approaches alone, usually have a limited scope in supporting someone's recovery from chronic fatigue, they can be very helpful in decreasing stress levels, for example by finding ways to manage symptoms, to adjust to the radical changes that chronic fatigue brings, and to address any behavioural patterns that result in difficult inter-personal relationships.

A truly holistic approach is often needed for someone to fully recover, and this might mean nutritional support and body-centred therapies, together with psychological approaches. Craniosacral therapy is particularly helpful with fatigue conditions as it works holistically to help resolve emotional experiences as well as physiological conditions, and it enables the person to access a restful, healing state. It is also well known as a safe, effective treatment for the integration of traumatic experiences.

Some people have found therapeutic skills used in the treatment of chronic stress and post-traumatic stress, such as EMDR (eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing), EFT (emotional freedom technique) and CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy), have helped with fatigue symptoms. These approaches employ psychological tools that help change physiological states – although as with post-traumatic stress, chronic fatigue is not a purely psychological condition. If traumatic life events contributed to the onset of the fatigue, these approaches may be a particularly important part of the therapeutic journey.

Self-care strategies and tools

There are many things you can do to reduce stress levels and support your own healing. How you support yourself and how you recover will be personal to you. The good news is that deep down you will know how to do it for yourself, because recovery is a natural and instinctive process. What you need to do might initially seem illogical (as it is your

thinking mind, not the instinctual mind, that works in logic), so practise trusting your instinctual nature and give yourself the freedom to be creative and non-judgemental. There aren't really any rights or wrongs, the important thing is to proceed at your own pace, within your limits and with consciousness. Below are a list of strategies and tools to help develop resilience and aid recovery. All the tools outlined in the information sheet on *Supporting yourself* are also really useful in reducing stress levels, because they help to settle you in a sense of your strengths, and they are all ways of accessing a healing state.

Exercise:

Make sure you know what your particular ways of de-stressing and supporting yourself are, so that you can make sure to use them. Try taking some time now to write a list of the skills you know you have already. Then look through what is listed below, see which ones you already know, and maybe try some new ones, and see which work for you.

Knowing your resources

Resources are what support you and make you feel good. They are essential on any road to recovery. If you have high stress levels, it is likely that you will need to spend some time getting to know your resources better, and use them, as this can help you lower stress levels, process stressful experiences, and support your recovery from chronic fatigue.

Exercise:

Write a list of what supports you, and what makes you feel good. If you find the list hard to write, or you only have a few things on it, do read the introduction to the information sheet on supporting yourself, together with the sections on getting to know your resources and regular resourcing.

Spending time in nature or internal safe space

Most people find that spending time in the local park or woods, or visiting a special place, is soothing and this helps your body's natural healing to develop. Spend time in contact with nature and see if you can consciously appreciate it with all your senses. Gardening and relationships with animals can be important, and any contact with nature can be very nourishing.

Exercise:

You can use your imagination to take yourself to what is sometimes called an 'internal safe place' — somewhere nurturing and relaxed — like a beach, your favourite café, or somewhere you especially like in nature. See if you can really feel yourself there by using each of your senses in turn. Try describing it to

yourself in great detail. Notice the changes in your body when you do this so that you get to recognise what it feels like to move into a state of being more relaxed. Practice this, maybe before you go to sleep, so you can go to this place whenever you need to be more relaxed.

Reminding yourself that you are safe

You access healing when you feel safe. However, if someone has high stress levels, their body is in 'emergency' mode, and it is very hard to feel safe. Emergency mode is a common state for people with fatigue conditions (see *Pacing* for more on this). Being in emergency mode means that sometimes people can feel unsafe when there is no danger around them. However, while their internal, bodily environment, or experiencing self, may be telling them that they are not safe, there will be clues in their external environment that their observing self can notice. (It's important to say here that this doesn't negate the felt sense of threat: both are different realities co-existing.) To help feel more relaxed and to build a sense of safety you can identify aspects of your environment that show you that you are safe right now. This can help you access a healing state once more.

Exercise:

Ask yourself 'What tells me I am safe right now?' and see how many answers you can come up with. Things to notice may be sounds (or lack of sounds), other people's behaviour, your previous experience of being in that place, details from your physical environment, as well as some sensations in your body. Bear in mind that this exercise is easier to do in peaceful environments like your bedroom or a park; rather than a busy town centre. Find yourself a quiet, familiar place to try this at first. At other times you may want to practice this skill in a busier setting so you can do it whenever you need to.

If someone is recovering from traumatic experiences, the stress response may recur in their body as if the event is not yet over, meaning they are in emergency mode. This makes recovery from both the experience and chronic fatigue difficult. The above exercise can be very helpful in showing the person — in an embodied, experiential way — that they are safe, and their experiences are in the past. Gradually this helps reprogramme the body so that the memory is filed in the past, learned from but not stopping them living how they want to now. Once someone knows they are safe, healing begins.

Using dual awareness

Feeling distressed, overwhelmed or in pain can activate the body's stress responses, but dual awareness can make listening to the body manageable and ultimately lower stress

levels so that healing can occur. Dual awareness simply means holding an awareness of two things at once.

Many therapies use the principle of dual awareness to ground awareness in the present, alongside awareness of any difficult feelings, memories, narratives or body sensations. For example, EMDR and EFT use eye movements or tapping, respectively to maintain a focus in the present, while helping processing and integration of experiences in other ways

There are a variety of ways to focus awareness in the present, and use dual awareness to counterbalance pain or distress – for example: focusing on a pleasant body sensation; something that resources you; your internal safe place; or details about your immediate environment, such as a specific object, colour or pattern, or what tells you that you are safe. If someone has got used to feeling 'louder' sensations such as pain or fear, it may take some practice to find pleasant body sensations in their body, but even the smallest area, like their little finger is enough.

Exercise:

Gently scan your whole body with your awareness. Find a place in your body that feels comfortable right now. Then deepen into your awareness of that place: Where is it? What qualities or sensations do you find there? Keep describing it to yourself until you feel your awareness is well grounded in those sensations.

Once that feels stable, you can try gently expanding your awareness from the place of ease towards a painful area, or difficult memory. Hold the two places in your mind like a well-balanced see-saw. This is dual awareness. If discomfort draws your attention, tilting the see-saw, just allow your awareness to gravitate back along the see-saw towards the place of comfort and ease, until it is in balance once more. At any time, you can return to immersing your full awareness to the place of ease, and rest there.

This exercise helps the body tap into the healing space that most complementary therapies facilitate. From a physiological perspective it helps balance the nervous system, and you may well notice a greater feeling of calm.

A well-balanced see-saw means neither suppressing feelings or memories, nor being overwhelmed by them. If we override, or suppress our feelings, particularly anxiety, they tend to get louder and louder until we have to listen to them. Finding a way to attend to our feelings, and the body sensations that form them, without becoming overwhelmed, is an important skill. By using dual awareness, we can increase our capacity to cope with stress, including the stress of being unwell, or to

cope with the pain of fibromyalgia. With time, dual awareness can become a healthy habit that helps everyday stresses feel more manageable, and this means we can spend more time in a relaxed state, when healing can happen.

Dealing with panic attacks

Some people with chronic fatigue experience panic attacks. These can range from highly uncomfortable peaks of anxiety to debilitating attacks that can take longer to recover from.

Not only are panic attacks extremely unpleasant, they are also depleting, especially to someone with a fatigue condition. The body will need time to recover from panic attacks. Below are some strategies that can help stop them happening, or help them finish more quickly. Once they are over, any of the skills outlined here, or in the information sheet on supporting yourself, can be used to help access a healing state once more.

If a panic attack comes on quickly, all the person can do is ride it out. But remember, they do pass. However, if the person is in touch with their body sensations, they may be able to spot the panic building and find a way to head off a panic attack.

Panic attacks are sometimes the body confusing a past experience with the present, so any of the previous exercises that help ground the person in a sense of being safe and in the present can help. Dual awareness can also help prevent further stress building and diffuse it, but if the feelings of anxiety get too strong to be balanced by other sensations, then it's useful for the person to distract themselves.

1– Distraction and heading off a panic attack

Simply changing position or getting up and walking around are good ways to head off a panic attack. Grounding also helps – by bringing attention to the feet or whatever way works for the person. Anything that distracts the person from the panic by absorbing their attention can be used – a good piece of music, a photograph of a holiday, or even doing the washing up. Some people find setting themselves tasks, like seeing how many blue things they can spot, then how many red things and so on, can help them settle. Another thing to try is finding just one place in their body that feels OK, and then focus on describing it to themselves.

2– Breathing exercises, and focussing on your out-breath

Panic attacks are usually associated with changes to breathing, so any breathing exercise that helps someone breathe more deeply and slowly, and prevent hyperventilation are effective ways to calm down.

Hyperventilation feels to the person as if they not getting enough air; when in fact the opposite is true – there is too much oxygen being breathed in.

To rebalance oxygen levels, it is the out-breath that the person need to concentrate on – the in-breath will happen by itself. Some people find blowing into a paper bag and then breathing that same air back again helps (it has less oxygen which helps the body's physiology to adjust into a calmer state). For others it is enough to make sure they are breathing out from their bellies (not just their chest) or follow the short side of an A4 sheet of paper for the in-breath and the long side for the out-breath.

Strategy:

Counting your out-breaths, start with one and count up to three out-breaths, and then repeat – starting at one and counting again, up to three. As your breaths become easier, go up to five, and then ten. If you lose your place, simply start at one again. If you have a friend with you, get them to count too.

3– External reality check

Panic attacks describe the person's internal state, they are not a result of what is happening in their immediate environment. So it may help the person to describe aloud what is happening around them – as an external reality check to balance out the internal sensations of panic. While rational thinking can help someone navigate out of the early stages of a panic attack, it is more effective for someone to feel their way out of a panic attack by immersing themselves in what their five sense are telling them. To do this, describe the colour of the walls, what the floor is made of, the socks they are wearing today. The above exercise "what tells me I am safe right now?" can also help, but any sensory information from the external environment works.

If you have panic attacks and might have someone around who can support you through one, explaining the above information beforehand can be helpful. They can support you to use any or all of these strategies and keep bringing your attention back to day-to-day things. They should make any movements as minimal, slow and calm as possible. Also, it helps if they can remember to try and stay calm and grounded themselves – just as panic can spread, so can calmness.

Dealing with visual flashbacks

Intrusive images, sensations or memories from traumatic experiences are known as flashbacks. They raise the body's stress levels, and so they interrupt healing. "Diffusing" flashbacks can stop them activating the body's stress responses and allow someone to recover from the experience, as well as the

fatigue condition. Below are a few simple methods to try. For those who have flashbacks frequently, it may be worth investing in a course of EMDR, as that is an effective way of diffusing them and integrating the experience.

If someone is having flashbacks, it's important they remind themselves they survived the original experience, and the proof of that is that they are here now, focusing awareness in the present. For this it can help to check in with the immediate surroundings, age or body size, their current situation, especially if these have changed substantially.

Finally, because the original event now exists only in memory, the person can use their imagination to alter their current experience of it and be in control. This diffuses its power to intrude, and can help the body to file the original experience as history.

Strategy:

If it feels manageable, see if you can use your imagination to reduce the impact of a difficult image or memory by introducing new elements: Start with something simple and quick, like dressing people in bright pink for instance. Later, you can try introducing helpful objects, a really strong friend who would've known how to support you, or even a character from a film, and see what they might have done to help.

If this feels too difficult at first, try imagining a favourite object or shield between you and the memory. This can help build your sense of control, until it feels possible to directly change things in the image or memory itself. You can also practice these techniques on neutral memories, for example an image of something you did yesterday that wasn't too stressful.

You can also introduce a magical beast that helps you escape, or invent a secret escape route. You can find all kinds of ways to protect the entrance – codes, mythical characters, laser technology etc – so that only you, or your friends, can use it. They should take you from the place in the memory to somewhere in real life where you feel safe (or to your internal safe space). Take time to visualise yourself using them, as many times as you want.

Unlike the real world, there is no limit in your imagination, so use your creativity, and borrow from books, myths and films. And while these tools are simple, they really are powerful.

Coping with difficult sensations, numbing or dissociation

It's not unusual for people in our society to have lost touch with their bodies, their hungers and their limits. Culturally,

intellectual abstraction is encouraged more than embodied ways of knowing and being in the world. Technologies can also cut us off from our bodies: it is hard to remain embodied when working on a computer for hours. People are often taught to cheer up, put on a brave face, avoid difficult feelings and push through pain. At times, these are a useful strategies, but all too often they deny the body the attention it needs to stay within our limits and to be able to heal.

Pushing through fatigue can require us to cut off from the sensations that tell us how exhausted we are. Chronic pain, such as fibromyalgia or painful digestion, can cause someone to numb to their sensations or to dissociate. Dissociation is sometimes called having an out-of-body experience, although it can also apply to a small area of the body (for example, legs or abdomen), and some people retreat deep inside themselves rather than out of their bodies.

In traumatic experiences, dissociation helps people survive what would otherwise have been difficult or unbearable. It is an important survival skill. When depleted, ordinarily stressful experiences can feel overwhelming and therefore traumatic. Severe exhaustion and chronic pain are common symptoms of fatigue conditions and many people discover that they have dissociated in order to cope with everyday life.

Someone who is dissociated may feel a little spacey, clumsy or disconnected from daily events. They may feel emotionally cut off, depressed, numb or even feel like dying. Dissociation also has an effect on muscle tone (muscles can be floppy or tense in the dissociated area) and this can cause musculoskeletal problems. As dissociation is part of the body's stress response, it makes it hard to access the healing state needed for recovery. However, with greater sense of support, the need to dissociate fades, and people can find real joy in getting back in touch with their sensory reality: rediscovering tastes, smells, colours and sensations can be a rich process.

An important thing to remember is that if someone's body has considered it is safer not to feel the painful sensations, or this limb or part of the person, then that is a wise choice, and there is no need to go feeling into those areas. But what does help is being present to the dissociation, as this means really listening to the body's limits and respecting them.

Exercise:

Locate an area in your body that feels most comfortable right now. Get to know the feeling of this place well so that you can bring your attention back there at any time. It is most supportive if you can use dual awareness (see exercise above) to maintain part of your awareness here while doing the rest of this exercise.

Try scanning your body with your attention. Is your outline fuzzy or sharp? Where are you located? Are you floating above or beside yourself? If so, exactly where are you floating?

Are you inhabiting the whole of your body or just a part of it? Can you sense the whole of your body? Do your arms and legs feel the same, or does one feel lighter, bigger, more distant or less substantial than the rest? See how precise you can be in describing this to yourself. Stay with the edges of what you are feeling: at what point does your leg stop feeling so solid, is it a fine line, or a fuzzy line? What qualities can you sense in this area of transition?

If you feel your stress levels increasing while you do this exercise, then bring your focus back to the area in your body that feels OK right now, rest there and take a break. However, most people find that, as long as they don't force anything, this exercise begins to feel calming as the body responds well to being listened to carefully.

When suffering chronic pain or anxiety, it is easy to forget that you can feel pleasure, and eventually this forgetting can lead to dissociation. Some people find that seeking out pleasant sensations, such as the warmth of sun on your skin, the massage of a shower; enjoying chocolate melting on the tongue, stroking a cat, smelling roses, walking barefoot on wet grass, can all help to balance out unpleasant sensations. These can all be reminders of what wellbeing feels like and so support healing.

Just like any resourcing activity, it can be helpful to programme these into your day: What sensations feel good to you? Which are your favourites? Do you get to sense them every day? Getting well doesn't have to be an unpleasant process, in fact the more pleasure you can have the easier and more quickly you heal.

All these strategies and tools help the body switch from a stress state into a relaxed state when healing can occur. They are also fantastic life skills for building resilience and dealing with the stresses and challenges faced by anyone in full health. The coping and self-healing strategies you learn during recovery from fatigue conditions will be invaluable once you are beginning to reintegrate into life as you want to live it.

Further reading

The Body Remembers, by Babette Rothschild covers detailed post-traumatic stress theory and practice, and outlines some useful self-care skills.