

INFORMATION SHEET 1

Supporting yourself through recovery

In order to heal, you need to be feeling well resourced – this essentially means feeling supported by yourself and who or what is around you. 'Resources' is a word to describe anything that makes us feel good, safe and strong. The concept of resources is an important one, because once you know what your resources are, how to use them and why you need them, you can best support yourself through your recovery process.

Self-care strategies and tools

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A resource can be a skill or a character trait, or something that enables you to use that skill or express a particular part of your personality. A resource can be very simple, like the colour of a flower or someone cooking for you. Other common resources include a good book, a supportive relationship, an activity that you enjoy, food that you like – anything really, your particular set of resources will be very personal to you. Our most fundamental resource is our health, and energy to heal.

Positive psychologist and addictions specialist Chris Johnstone breaks down the concept of resources further; into strategies, strengths, resources and insights (natural SSRIs). *Strategies* are things we do, *strengths* are personal qualities we draw upon within us, *resources* are what or who we turn to, *insights* are forms of wisdom that help, such as ideas or ways of looking at things.

For many people with fatigue conditions, their resources have severely diminished. Their energy levels are low, emotional resilience and coping strategies are stretched, and activities that used to nourish them are no longer possible. This means that they need to find new ways to relax, feel good and have enjoyment in their lives. These new ways may look very different to their previous activities, or they may be activities that they have modified to be more manageable. For example, if someone used to spend Saturday morning working out in the gym, they may find they can still manage a short swim. Others reawaken old interests that might have been neglected in a busy life, such as listening to folk music, or watching garden birds

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Viola Sampson RCST
www.violasampson.com

If, like most people who get ME or chronic fatigue, you now have less enjoyment in your life, then your capacity to heal will be even less than when you first got ill. It is vital to approach this creatively to learn what can resource you now and what you can do to make sure you are using those resources to their full potential. It's also worth knowing that increasing your conscious appreciation of your resources can boost the effect they have in supporting you.

It is tempting to deprioritise enjoyable or relaxing activities when many pressing build up. But even though you may be too fatigued to do other important things, it is vital to your recovery that some of each day is spent in a relaxing and enjoyable manner. The hormones released and nerve pathways activated when you are happy and relaxed are essential to healing. And so if getting well is your greatest

priority, taking time to relax and nourish yourself is one of the most important things in your day.

As with all resources, the strategies and tools you find to support yourself through recovery will be particular to you – and your needs will change over time. In this information sheet there are tools that people have found helpful over the years. Please do let me know yours so I can add to this list. Many of the tools focus on decreasing stress levels, as that is one of the most important things to do, to allow your body to access its own healing. Developing resources is much more than stress reduction – in the same way that generating financial wealth means more than reducing debt. However, stress is a symptom of fatigue conditions, as well as a maintaining factor, and it can be a cause. If you feel that stress or anxiety is a theme for you, please see the additional information sheets on *Stress, anxiety and chronic fatigue*.

Self-care strategies and tools

Developing your sense of your resources

Listing your resources

Make a list of who and what you turn to for support, nourishment and inspiration, and what you consider to be your personal strengths and skills. You may choose to write headers to several columns, for example: resources in me; resources in my home; resources in my community. Or perhaps try: strategies, strengths, resources and insights.

Using hindsight

Think of a time in your life that was challenging, but when you coped really well. What were the things that you did, what was around you and what did you draw upon at the time? Include these in your list of resources.

Three good things

One really good way to learn what your resources are is to make time at the end of every day to write down three things that made you feel good: they can be something small, or something someone said to you. You might be surprised at things that support you. Once you know what they are, you can draw on them when you need them most.

The simplicity of this exercise belies its power. Remembering the things that made you feel good that day gives you a burst of 'happy hormones', so recording them is like getting two good things for the price of one! Done at the end of the day, it can also encourage more relaxed sleep. This is a useful tool

to use in periods of depression too, as it stimulates the body's natural production of antidepressant hormones.

If you only do one of these exercises, I recommend you do this one.

Regular resourcing

Look at your list of resources and see if there are any you can do even if you are far from home or have very little time or energy. Mark these on your list for easy reference. You may also consider keeping a notebook of your lists of 'three good things' and reading them occasionally.

Drinking tea is one of the best resourcing activities. It signals time out and the heat is comforting and helps you to reconnect with your core. Lemon balm is uplifting, chamomile is calming, and while there is caffeine in normal tea, the tannins are soothing. A spoonful of honey can replenish you. Coffee and caffeinated drinks usually make people stressed; get to know your reactions to these and consider avoiding them.

Make sure you have activities during each day that are resourcing or remind you what your resources are: this could be making sure you cook a meal, or sit down with a cup of tea, or doing some stretches. Some people find meditation, yoga and martial arts helpful, others make sure they connect with nature each day in some way; even just getting outside for a few minutes helps most people.

Looking after your basic needs

Eating and sleeping are two important resources. Together with being fully hydrated and warm enough, these are more important than ever while you are healing, and you won't have as much flexibility about missing a meal or having a late night as people with more health. Make sure you eat and rest properly. It is good to plan ahead so that you don't leave things to chance.

When you are fatigued, it can sometimes be hard to hear your body's signals telling you that you are hungry or thirsty or cold, so when you feel a dip in energy, make sure you run a mental check list; asking yourself whether you are meeting those three basic needs. Some people find it helps to programme in rest, eating and water breaks into their day at specific times to make sure these needs are met even when the body is giving confusing or unclear signals.

Food

Digestive difficulties and food intolerances are common in fatigue conditions. Working with a nutritionist to support your digestive system, perhaps by avoiding some foods, and introducing new ones, is often a good step. Adjusting to a new diet can take some practice, and may mean it's hard to buy food on the go. Maintaining a steady blood sugar level makes most things a lot easier. Some people find eating little and often is most supportive. Remember to carry a non-sugary snack with you if you can, so that you always have something available.

Water

Make sure you drink plenty of water (in addition to any juice or tea) as preventing dehydration can be especially important in fatigue conditions. Many people discover it helps to switch to bottled spring water (mainly due to hormones from the contraceptive pill and other chemicals that may be in tap water). Most people find drinking two litres of water a day is helpful, while more than two litres can make it hard to retain nutrients. Some sudden bouts of fatigue may be due to dehydration, so try drinking a glass of water when your energy levels dip.

Sleep

Get to know how many hours sleep you tend to need and make sure your sleep time is safeguarded, and you don't get too much or too little except occasionally. On the occasions when this is not possible, you will then know that you may have to be more careful with pacing and managing fatigue. Unrestful sleep, including difficulties getting to sleep, or waking too early or wakefulness in the night, are all signs that elevated stress levels may be part of someone's fatigue

picture. If this is the case for you, read the information sheet for strategies and tools to lower stress levels.

You can also support your sleep by stopping work on the computer, or watching TV, an hour or two before going to bed, as these can be stimulating activities, and the light from the screen can interrupt your brain's understanding that it is night time. Instead, do some relaxing oasis activities. You can also try switching to candle light as you go to bed.

Regular de-stressing: activities and oases

Stress uses up a lot of energy and diverts your body's resources away from healing. Make sure you know what thoughts or activities help stop stress levels building. These may include talking things through with a friend, writing a diary or taking a tea break.

Resourcing activities are often calming in themselves. Consider programming these into your day at regular intervals. Be concerned if you keep delaying them or miss them out – being unable to prioritise resourcing can, in itself, be a sign you are stressed. Try grouping your list of resources and de-stressing activities into at least three groups: those available to you during your most fatigued times, those you can do on your best days, and those in between.

Oases are resourcing activities that support you by taking you outside a stressful situation. This can give you a break from feeling unwell or focussing on recovery. An oasis may be spending time imagining yourself in your favourite place (and this can be anywhere in the world) and feeling all the sensations you would be feeling there, or it may be reading a good book, listening to some music, meditating, or knitting.

For more strategies and tools for reducing stress levels, see information sheet on *Stress anxiety and chronic fatigue – strategies and tools*.

Using body awareness

Developing body awareness is one of the most powerful of self-care tools, yet most people take their bodies for granted and don't realise how out of touch they can be with them. People with fatigue conditions often feel the need to push through their comfort zones to do work or be sociable, but being aware of when we do this is important self care, especially if we are forcing things out of habit or a sense of necessity when we don't really need to. Body awareness is essential to pacing – a skill that is vital in managing fatigue symptoms and saving energy so that it can be used for healing. (Pacing is such an important skill, I have

dedicated a whole information sheet to it.)

Tracking and managing stress

Tracking sensations helps you to watch your energy levels and stress, and so can help you stay within your limits when this is possible. At other times, it simply helps you to know when you are in a situation that pushes you beyond your limits, so you can make sure you give yourself extra support afterwards.

Being able to stay in touch with your body sensations can help you to stay grounded and clear headed. It also helps you to recover faster from stressful experiences.

You can pick up stress from other people's stress.

Developing body awareness can help you manage this resonance, by being better able to work out what is yours and what is someone else's. Alongside noticing as soon as your stress levels increase, having techniques to lower your stress levels can help you settle when in the company of someone who is stressed.

Bringing your awareness to how you are breathing is also a good way to monitor your stress levels. If you feel like you are holding your breath, or only breathing lightly, try taking a few deep breaths, as this in itself can be calming.

Developing and using body awareness

Simply checking in with how your feet feel, or the sensations that tell you whether you are sitting on a hard or soft chair or what your posture is, are all useful ways of developing body awareness. You can also use a simple scanning method: moving your awareness at a slow but equal pace throughout your body.

We are often drawn to listen to the louder, more uncomfortable or painful parts of the body, but make sure you familiarise yourself with parts that feel good right now (and in what ways). When you scan your body sensations, anchor your attention in the sensations that are comfortable while you explore others that aren't: keep your awareness between them balanced like two ends of a see-saw. (This is known as dual awareness, and can be used effectively in pain or stress management – see the information sheet on *Stress and anxiety: strategies and tools* for more on this.)

See how many words you can describe the comfortable areas with. Other questions might include: Where am I holding tension? Don't try to change things, this is about simply noticing and becoming aware of them. At first, you may need to do this in a quiet space, as sensations may feel quite subtle, and if you have time, you may find it good to set aside 15 minutes, or longer, for practising. But as you

become familiar with this, you will be able to do it in a few seconds in any situation.

Sometimes, developing body awareness may be an uncomfortable process; there may be physical or emotional discomfort. If this is the case, respect any resistance you have and don't force anything. Let yourself take breaks. Then see if you can return to it later. Practice it just a little bit at a time. Setting yourself the task of finding the most comfortable place in your body and describing what sensations are there, is often the best way to start. You might find that using your visual sense and imagination (images, colours, textures etc) to explore different areas of your body, is easier at first.

Notice the changes in your body when you become calm – get familiar with them. A good time to do this is when you have tried a relaxing breathing exercise (see below). Make a note of as many of these sensations as you can, together with where they are located in your body. Later, you can try imagining these sensations, and see if that induces a state of relaxation. With practice, you can get to the point that these sensations are so familiar to you that you can access them in your body easily. This is an incredibly powerful way to soothe yourself, and empowers you with a choice to be calm in most situations. Similarly, some people find that they can remember the feelings of deep relaxation common in craniosacral sessions, and that they can access a similar healing space when they do this.

By taking time to appreciate being fully alive, in our sensing bodies and our environment, we can build resilience as well as access our healing resources for recovery.

Grounding and centring

Being grounded means feeling solid and connected to the earth beneath you. Body awareness is grounding in itself, but there are several ways to connect yourself with the larger support of the earth you stand on. Simply wriggling your feet, or stretching your leg muscles can help.

Martial arts practices are good for grounding. Other people like to imagine themselves having roots like a tree, and following the roots down into the earth. You may find that connecting with the sensations in your feet helps, or the weight of your body, and which parts are in contact with the ground or a chair.

See if you can tune in to how the support of your bed or chair is holding you up. This perspective can be gently energising as well as grounding.

Find out what works for you, practice them so that you can respond to stress immediately by shifting back towards a grounded and restful healing state.

Breathing

There are lots of different breathing techniques that help settle your mind and body, and enable you to enter deeply relaxed healing states. It is worth exploring which ones you like best. If you find watching your breath makes you anxious, try watching it from a different place – inside your nose or from the movement of your belly, for example. Find a way that is comfortable for you.

One breathing technique is to take a long, slow, deep breath while counting up to five, then exhale slowly to the count of five. Imagine this as a circular movement – breathing out excess tension, and breathing in relaxation.

Another good technique involves using your finger or thumb to close one nostril at a time – closing the right nostril, breathe in through the left nostril and then close the left nostril and breath out of the right, then back in through the right nostril. At the top of this in-breath, switch sides so that you're closing the right nostril and breathe out again through the left, and so on. (You breathe out the same nostril that you then breathe in through, and switch sides at the end of the in-breath.)

Preparing for relapses

Relapses are an inevitable part of the recovery process. They may be triggered by normal exposure to viral infections, or even the excitement of being able to do more can lead to overexertion. Even the best laid plans and the most refined pacing skills can't prevent relapses. A sudden change in the weather, a distressing event, or sheer bad luck are all part of life, and so preparing for relapses is essential to recovery. The better you are prepared – psychologically and practically – the less impact relapses have, and the quicker you can find your way back into making steady progress.

Recovery for some people can be quite dramatic and quick, once they have worked out what supports their healing capacity and ways to build up their strength. For most people it is a long slow process, and at times it may feel like you are making no progress. Either way, resources are essential to managing symptoms and connecting with your own healing: Your body naturally gravitates towards healing – all it needs is some help and support. Knowing your resources, and using them, is an excellent life skill – during recovery and in full health. Discovering what supports you and exploring how you can better support yourself can be rewarding, and even fun! And I hope that your journey to recovery – and beyond into full health – is one that uncovers many riches.

One really nice tool is the 'resources box'. This is a special box that you put aside for those times when you do relapse. You choose the items you need in there, and these should be both practical supports, such as easy-to-prepare food (tins of soup are good) and a bottle of water, together with things that support you emotionally – things that make you feel good, like a relaxing CD, lavender essential oil or photographs of a special place. Some people might find it helpful to include affirmations, inspiring quotes, or notes to yourself reminding you of what has helped you before during relapses, such as hot baths or certain stretches.

If you have a partner, it may be helpful for them, and for you, if you can give them ideas of things they can do that you would find supportive, practically and emotionally, for the times when you relapse. For ideas, look at your lists of 'three good things', and if, for example, you find that flowers give you a boost, then perhaps they can buy you a bunch of flowers to have by your bed.

Relapses do happen, and it can be very upsetting to find you feel just as bad as you used to. However, it is the length of time between relapses that is the measure of progress, as well as how quickly you bounce back from them. As your health builds, and with good pacing skills, you will be able to lessen the severity of relapses and recover faster from them. Your health will be building in the periods between relapses, so as they increase, no relapse is a step backwards to the ones before, even though you may feel otherwise.

It is at these times that you most need to draw on your resources, and it may be the time when you have least motivation or energy to do so. Knowing your resources and which ones you have access to when you are really unwell and require very little effort is really important. Practising techniques, and making sure you have within easy reach what you need for oases and other activities, is all part of being well prepared.