The Predication of a Symptomatic Illness

Many people from every background and all walks of life become sick at one time or another. Most illnesses people can and do recover from. They are endured for a limited amount of time. Then there are the other illnesses, the chronic ones, the ones that do not go away and if so, rarely. I would like to introduce one such illness: Fibromyalgia Syndrome or FMS.

I was diagnosed with FMS in March of 2002. However I believe I suffered from it severely since 2000. I know of a few current studies involving this illness, although there are a few. Many doctors do not have much information about it. It is often called a symptomatic illness because of the way in which it is diagnosed. The tests for other illnesses with similar symptoms are run, such as Lupus and other autoimmune diseases. When these diseases are ruled out and these symptoms persist over a period of time, usually for 6 months or more, this is the only diagnosis.

The symptoms of FMS are chronic and pervasive meaning that they are long lasting, severe at times, and they affect your entire system. The body is affected in several ways. There is mild to moderate, sometimes severe pain in the joints and/or muscles of primary parts of the body. This is often accompanied by fatigue. There are these horrible bouts of nausea with a sort of abdominal achy discomfort. These episodes of nausea sometimes come in waves, or become severe and last for hours. During these attacks I find it difficult to rest or find a comfortable position. They strike most often during menstruation; however they can occur at any time. I also rarely find anything, from OTC medication to spiritual and/or homeopathic/naturopathic remedies that relieve much less halt this intense feeling of discomfort. Most of the time I simply must endure it until it subsides. The only pattern I have found to the occurrences is that it almost always happens early in the morning and wakes me up. Usually I get a period of mild to moderate nausea accompanied by a lightheaded dizzy feeling. Sometimes I am able to continue with an activity, but usually I have to stop whatever I am doing until the discomfort passes. Then there are the headaches.

Many suffer from severe to migraine level. I am lucky; I only experience mild headaches but frequently, almost everyday. I suffered more migraines in the early part of my sickness from 2000-2002, but once I began my medication treatment, they were greatly reduced. I also have a reduction of those 'attacks' that wake me up,, but it is mainly the not knowing and not having a pattern to the sickness that is most frustrating. It is difficult and sometimes impossible to work any kind of steady job. Employers don't take too well to one calling in sick, arriving late, and leaving early. Also it takes longer to complete projects due to the next thing that is affected. Many refer to it as brain fog or the 'Fibro-fog'. It's an almost dementia-like forgetfulness accompanied by difficulty concentrating and remembering events. I experience a seemingly unusual difficulty recounting events and organizing them into chronological order.

All of these things together make a very uncomfortable cocktail. Then there is the predicament that FMS sufferers are faced with everyday. Most don't look sick at all. In fact sometimes we look quite well. I am a pretty cheerful sick person and have been since childhood. Most of the time, I am able to interact socially, chat, and go through the motions as if everything is fine. Most people however, believing the 'actions speak louder than words' philosophy don't want to hear or accept that anything is or could be wrong. If you are acting fine or look fine then you must be fine. This is probably a little bit of an instinctual reaction left over from our caveman days. When people looked for a mate, it was based mostly on appearance, for a good appearance meant strength, health and vitality. Those were and still are important attributes. But in this day and age, what you see is not always what you get. I have become a very self-aware and self-analytical person regarding my body and health. I can usually tell when I am dehydrated. I know the difference between when I feel 'Fibro-sick' or simply have a hangover. In fact I have come to use that analogy to describe how I feel to others. It is frequently like the feel of a hangover. Fortunately I have had few actual hangovers, but it is *unfortunate* in regards to feeling that way when I have not imbibed. Unfortunately traditional medical opinions, practices and doctrines don't encourage self-

awareness or being in tune with your own body. They often treat you as if you couldn't possibly know what is wrong if it is more complex than a common cold. This is a big problem in hospitals today. If doctors can't explain it or give you something that stops it, then they simply dismiss it. I say this from experience not just things I've read. So little is known about Fibromyalgia, as it is a fairly recently discovered illness. Many doctors say it is psychosomatic. I have read much to the contrary however. I have seen it referred to as a systemic illness, musculoskeletal, etc. To say it is psychosomatic in my opinion is often the medical equivalent of a cop-out. It is a way of saying, we don't understand it; don't know how to treat it, so it must be all in your head. Look how much medical science has discovered, developed, and advanced in the past century or even in the past few decades. There was a time when nothing short of a miracle could save someone with TB or Pneumonia.

I have combined a little traditional medicine with naturopathic practices. There is the theory of genetic predisposition. I have read many things that state that only women between the ages of 25 & 50 develop FMS. Then later writings say there may be an adolescent form of the illness as well. Then in one book a woman claims to have suffered from it all her life and only when there was an extremely tragic or emotionally difficult event, a traumatic experience as it were, did the symptoms become debilitating. In addition she sees the symptoms in her children as well. There is also a theory that suggests that a person may be genetically predisposed to develop this illness. The extreme sensitivity to pain may be due to our pain receptors being more finely tuned or an increased sensitivity from our nervous system. Reading this excerpt I recalled that from as young as I can remember I too had all of these symptoms and it was major traumatic emotional events in my life that caused them to become a debilitating factor. I have also always seemed to have an unusually high sensitivity to pain. Things that others can easily endure I find unbearable. Despite the advancements of the medical profession, there is still so much that is not known and understood about our bodies, brains, and the illnesses that plague them.

I have mostly joint pain similar to arthritis in what is known as the fibro points or tender points: the shoulders, neck, knees, hips, ankles. My most bothersome places of pain occur in my neck, shoulder, low back, hips, and knees. My hips and knees usually bother me when I must do a lot of walking and/or stair climbing. Exercise is supposed to be good for everyone, but since my illness has become so debilitating it is often very difficult to exercise. I have however recently discovered an ingenious nautilus machine that seems to be the easiest for me to use. It is the elliptical machine in the building's gym that I live in. It is a great boon to my efforts at weight loss and regaining my physical fitness. There are many days where I am able to accomplish a lot. However it is a constant struggle more than it should be for someone in my age group. I take several medications as well as anti-depressants, and although I'm not supposed to drink much, I do not seem to have much of an adverse effect from the consumption of alcohol. I do however keep alcohol consumption to a minimum.

Naturopathic remedies and philosophies include using herbs and vitamin supplements. I still haven't found the right combination of supplements that make me a fully functioning member of society. There are many stories of people overcoming the illness and returning to an almost ordinary life. Traditionally there is no cure for FMS and it may be a lifelong illness for many. Currently the things that help me the most are a mild muscle-relaxer called Flexeril; it's a generic drug called Cyclobenzaprine. This drug helps me to stay asleep and get back to sleep more easily if I should awaken. For me it is imperative that I get at least eight hours of uninterrupted sleep. How I feel is also directly relative to how much and how well I rest. If I don't rest well or enough, it has a detrimental effect on me the following day. Also a balanced diet helps me such as eating plenty of raw fruits and vegetables. Those two things are the most beneficial to me right now. And the other medication for depression, pain and an ulcer most likely from stress which I currently no longer have after writing this.

There are many books published now on Fibromyalgia, its symptoms, and treatment. There is even a Fibromyalgia for Dummies. I would suggest that you check out one of these books or go online. There is a website Fibromyalgia.com for information as well. Just to give you an idea of how new this illness is, the computer that I used to write this essay didn't recognize the word Fibromyalgia. I am writing this to raise awareness and understanding regarding an illness that plagues so many. It is so frustrating when medical professionals dismiss your complaints. From their side it is probably just too puzzling to spend all that time in medical school and as an intern etc. only to discover you don't have all the answers, many doctors become abrasive, close-minded, and even develop a God-complex to a degree. No one should have to put up with a doctor who doesn't listen to them or respect them. My experience has shown me that somewhere a doctor will take an interest in you and listen to you. It takes time, but they are out there. I will probably write a follow-up to this, once I have had an opportunity to read and experiment with new treatments, therapies, and remedies.

Another good thing to have is a support system, friends and/or family who will listen. It is especially comforting to have support if you have the combination of chronic clinical depression and FMS. I urge people reading this to be understanding, supportive and patient especially if they know someone who suffers with FMS. No one knows when they may be stricken with an illness that is misunderstood. I hope you read this with an open mind.

So in conclusion, Fibromyalgia Syndrome is a real illness, not psychosomatic as some would have you believe. It is simply misunderstood by many. There will come a time when people will either by traditional or naturopathic means or both, be able to overcome this debilitating illness and resume a productive successful life.

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