Studying With Fibromyalgia

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Stay on Track and Fight the Pain

Course work and tests are challenging for anyone, but the demands of school are even higher when you live with chronic pain. Simply getting to class can be torture when muscle stiffness and exhaustion flare-up, and the stress of studying can exacerbate physical symptoms even more.

In order to avoid a painful cycle of stress, worry, distraction and failure, set yourself up for success by getting organized and adjusting your priorities. Rather than ignoring your fibro symptoms, learn good ways to compensate for them and you'll be able to strike the good balance you'll need to continue with your education.

How Fibromyalgia Interferes With School

Every patient experiences their own set of fibro symptoms, but a few common discomforts tend to make studying with fibromyalgia difficult:

- **Fatigue –** Perhaps the most difficult fibro symptom to overcome in school is fatigue. It can hit hard and interfere with everything from taking notes to meeting deadlines.
- **Concentration issues –** Pain and fatigue lead to problems concentrating, and in turn, a drop in grades. Staring at a computer screen can also feed fatigue, headaches and back strain.
- **Physical limitations –** From pushing through crowded hallways to opting out of extracurricular activities, the physical pain of fibromyalgia can restrict the amount you participate (and excel) in your studies.
- **Depression –** Feelings of sadness, isolation and apathy are not uncommon among fibromyalgia patients, and these can interfere with focus, concentration and memory.

Physical symptoms are a big part of learning issues, but they aren't the only challenges. Emotional ups and downs can interfere with learning, too, and you should have a plan to handle the mental stress that's connected to your physical stress.

Overcoming Psychological Barriers to Studying

For many fibromyalgia sufferers, focus is a central obstacle. Pain, stiffness and brain fog can interrupt your studying, but with some flexibility and more reasonable expectations, you can improve your focus – and likely, your academic performance.

Staying On Track Despite Distraction

Cognitive and physical difficulties can be incredibly distracting. Find a spot in your home that you can devote solely to work, and make it comfortable. Whether it is a whole room or just a corner, set up a surface and chair that are at the right height for you – you'll find that good posture helps keep you awake, comfortable and focused for longer.

Since mental efficiency is tied to physical comfort, get into the habit of stretching. Regular stretching is one of the best ways to beat stiffness, and a physiotherapist can teach you some effective stretches that will increase your range of motion.

Standing yoga poses are another easy way to lengthen sore muscles, as you can do them almost anywhere. It may sound counterintuitive, but the more small stretching breaks you take, the better you'll be able to focus when you get back to work.

Fighting the Little Voice in Your Head

When you struggle with coursework, it's natural to begin questioning your abilities. Paranoia is common: you may think that your peers are just humoring you, and that you really aren't as capable as you thought, or that the learning is simply not worth the struggle.

Unfortunately, your own doubts are some of the biggest obstacles you'll ever meet. When your fibromyalgia acts up, take time away from mental *and* physical activity.

Forcing yourself to work through your block may not be the best way forward, and on particularly difficult days, it's important to remind yourself of everything you have already accomplished, rather than what you don't feel up to completing right now.

Tips for Handling Schoolwork

Good preparation is the best way to get over the hurdles that lay ahead. Begin with a limited course load, and don't be afraid to drop a class down the road, if needed. After all, work can be postponed, but your health cannot. Be honest with yourself, limit your work load, and keep on top of your responsibilities with a few helpful approaches:

- **Set a schedule –** Be reasonable but firm with yourself. For instance, work for an hour, no excuses, then take a two-hour break. Whatever ratio works for you, go with it: what matters is that you get into a routine that you can stick with, and leave time for breaks and rests. It will help if you print out your work schedule and color code it, so you know exactly how to break up your study periods for more energy and productivity.
- **Have a back-up plan –** It's great to be ambitious, and it's important to challenge yourself, but remember that fibro symptoms can sneak up and overthrow your best intentions. Ask about setting a flexible class schedule to take advantage of the times when you're at your best, and try to substitute some classes for online courses, so you can eliminate the discomfort of travel.
- **Ask for help** – Most students with fibromyalgia can find plenty of resources at their fingertips to make studying easier. Bring a recording device to lectures, request a note-taker for your classes, or ask your teachers to be a little more lenient regarding your attendance. Be sure to check out your school's disability services to get some targeted support – you may be entitled to more time and resources for exams and assignments.

Optimism is important, but patience is a powerful tool when you live and study with fibromyalgia. Flare-ups can set you back and force you to readjust, so give yourself lots of time to reach your goals, and expect to hit some bumps along the way.

Consulting with a mental health counselor can be a good first step when it comes to setting realistic goals, and they have the experience and forethought to help you anticipate the challenges that come with a chronic pain disorder.