The Need to Set Priorities With Fibromyalgia

by STARLA RICH

Why We Should Be Setting Priorities With Fibromyalgia

Priorities — they can be a challenge to set and maintain for healthy individuals, nonetheless those dealing with the added issues that come with fibromyalgia. Still, setting priorities and learning how to fulfill them is of utmost importance if you are to regain control over your life once diagnosed with fibromyalgia.

This need has never hit home with me more than in the last few months. I have been walking the journey of life with fibro for almost 16 years, and as I face more of life's responsibilities, duties and opportunities, I understand more than ever how invaluable the art of setting priorities is.

Between assisting with caregiving for my 93-year-old grandmother and helping her primary caregiver (my mother, who was hospitalized and subsequently diagnosed with shingles), I have gained an even greater appreciation for setting priorities.

It isn't just a benefit but a necessity for my health, my life and theirs! Juggling those responsibilities along with my vocation as a writer and business owner can be daunting.

Perhaps you find yourself in similar situations — possibly as a parent of young children, or a primary breadwinner for the household. Maybe you are a caregiver to a spouse or family member, or even a single person who has no one to depend on but you.

If so, learning to set priorities can be a lifesaver — literally.

Before You Begin

Something that has been a daily tool for me is my handy to-do list. However, setting priorities is unrealistic if you don't take care of what should be at the top of the list — you!

Before you begin to set priorities, think about a day in your life with fibro. Here are a few basic questions to ask yourself:

- **What hours of the day are your highest energy hours?** Some people do better in the morning but fatigue in the afternoon, while others struggle with pain, stiffness and morning fatigue, but gain strength by the afternoon.
- **What is your maximum "energy envelope?"** You can find it by looking at your available energy versus your spent energy. Try not to go over your available energy, as this will exacerbate symptoms.
- **What self-care routines do you need through the day?** These time periods need to be properly assessed before setting priorities and actually need to be your top priority! Do you need breaks to rest? Time for stress relief activities such as yoga? Listening to music?

Setting Priorities 101

One thing fundamental to setting priorities is pacing. Learning to pace yourself will determine what is on your priorities list and what must either come off the list or be moved to another day or time.

I confess, pacing isn't something I've been gifted at through the years. I would run through my days like the Energizer bunny for hours — sometimes working 12 hours a day as well as accomplishing personal tasks without flinching. Now, pacing means survival for me and the only way I can manage my life.

Remember your energy envelope and determine how much time you can devote to each task or activity, as well as the self-care activities, and then implement pacing as a part of your priority goals.

Don't forget it is a marathon, not a sprint! Let your body, energy, pain and fatigue levels each day be your guide.

In addition, remember this: you *always* have time for what is first on your list. After putting your health as your number one priority, determine what matters most to you, then let that be next on your list of priorities.

Setting priorities and using some combination of delegating, simplifying and eliminating gives you a way to answer the question: *what should I do when I can't do it all?*

To set priorities, first list the activities you do in a typical week, making an estimate of the time each takes. Second, add up the times and compare them with the limits you established when you placed yourself on the energy envelope rating scale.

If items on your list take more time than your limits allow (for example, you would like to have six hours a day of activity, but your body allows four), you will have to make some adjustments in order to stay inside your energy envelope.

Third, decide what activities you will keep and which ones will be modified or dropped. To help you decide, you might give your activities different priorities, such as A, B and C.

Delegating means finding someone else to do a task you used to do. For example, have other family members do the grocery shopping or hire a cleaning service.

Simplifying means continuing to do something, but in a less elaborate or complete way. For example, you might clean house less often or cook less complicated meals.

Finally, you may decide to **eliminate some activities entirely.**

Priority How-To's

Once your priority list is made there are a few more specifics to remember to actually accomplish the tasks, activities and goals on the list:

- **Set Limits.** You can find your limits by experimenting and then enforce your limits by using a timer.
- **Shorten activity periods.** Adjust *how* you are active. For example, you might do ten minutes of housecleaning, rest for five minutes, then do another ten minutes of cleaning.
- **Practice activity shifting.** Shift frequently from among physical, mental and social activities. For example, if you find yourself tired or confused after working on the computer for a while, you might stop and call a friend or do something physical like preparing food.

- **Use the rule of substitution.** If something unanticipated arises, think substitution rather than addition: in order to add a new item to your schedule, drop one.

When setting priorities and meeting those things at the top of the list, flexibility is the key. If you are a structured

person as I am, learning to be flexible is sometimes difficult but a great gift if you can fully embrace the idea of flexibility.

Through it all be kind and patient with yourself and others in the process.