12 Coping Tips for Managing Fibromyalgia Fatigue, Pain and Stress

by STARLA RICH

12 Tips on Coping With Fibromyalgia

Sixteen years ago, my life forever changed not in the way I expected. However with time, patience, research and support, I learned how to navigate my “new normal" better.

Coping with fibromyalgia is always a work in progress as our bodies change and the conditions associated with FMS evolve in one way or another.

I would love to proclaim that life can be all it once was, but the truth is I have had to let go of the things that were too daunting. I have also had to find a different approach to embracing the things that I’ve always loved that are still possible.

Surprisingly, I have discovered new areas of life that I was too busy, structured or afraid to pursue. Honestly, had I not been forced to slow down once I began to experience flare-ups and diagnosed with fibromyalgia, I would not have pursued becoming a writer.

As I began journaling my experience through the difficulties of fibromyalgia, I discovered many ways to cope with all that this illness brings, and in the process also found fulfilling ways to thrive despite any setbacks that came my way.

12 Ways to Cope With Fibromyalgia

Write How You're Feeling in a Daily Journal

As I mentioned, journaling became a catalyst for a whole new life for me once I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia. While this coping method may not be considered the most obvious coping tool – it is a helpful starting point.

Writing in a journal every day can become a great tool for self-inquiry. Once I began to keep track of symptoms, patterns and even emotions through the process, I started “connecting the dots."

I recognized a series of events that triggered fibromyalgia symptoms.

I took notice of how I felt after a night of poor sleep or how stressful situations affected me. Next, I learned about how certain foods triggered reactions. I began to write these instances down and discovered a pattern to when my flare-ups were at their worst.

Once we understand more about our bodies, flare-ups and our emotions we experience through pain and difficulty–we can better cope with our condition.

Keeping a journal also allows your doctor to narrow in on your symptoms so that he or she can tailor your medical

care.

Reduce Stress When You Can

Studies have proven that stress is one of the primary triggers to fibro flare-ups.

Stress is a killer for healthy individuals and those diagnosed with a chronic illness. Many people with fibromyalgia experience feelings of anxiousness, nervousness and panic around the time when fibromyalgia symptoms flare.

Some experts found when fibromyalgia patients reduce stress in their lives, they also experience a reduction in depression, anxiety and fatigue levels.

This goes along with journaling as understanding your symptoms and triggers give you a more significant measure of control.

Don't Be Afraid to Walk Away

While we cannot walk away from every situation we face in our life, we can develop the skill of “walking away” emotionally so that we find a more balanced attitude about daily tasks and situations.

When you feel poorly, it tends to wear on your body and emotions until every circumstance in a day can appear insurmountable and loom over you. It becomes easy to magnify problems–making them seem far greater than they are.

Reaction to stress is triggered by perception. When you imagine something to be a "life or death situation," (even though in reality it is not) your body reacts as if you are in danger.

Work at tempering your emotions as problems come up throughout the day.

Instead of seeing every crisis as a disaster, learn to view life's interruptions as "inconvenient, but tolerable." You will find that when you look at life as something that you can handle, you will not feel overpowered when trouble comes.

The familiar adage asks the question *“how do you eat an elephant?*" The answer of course – *“one bite at a time.”* If you can keep balanced emotionally through the situations, tasks, and activities of your day by breaking them up into smaller “bites,” you can walk away from those emotions that try to overpower you.

Make Modifications For Better Living

At the beginning of this article, I made mention of the “new normal” – things that you can no longer do, things you discover you have time and passion for doing, and things that you may need to alter or pace a bit so as not to lose them.

The key to maintaining control in your life is through modifying the way you approach work, family life and everyday tasks and activities. To avoid stress and anxiety, you may need to allow more time during the day to fully carry out your responsibilities.

If you are still trying to manage a job or career, talk to your employer. Work out a flexible schedule that allows you to come in later and leave later or ask your employer if you can work from home a few times a week so you can get more rest.

Alternatively, ask if you could take a nap at lunchtime to boost your energy. If you are a stay-at-home parent or a caregiver, learn to adjust your schedule given your energy level from day-to-day.

Plan the most tedious tasks around the time of day that your energy level is highest. Whatever modifications you

make, avoid procrastination. Budget your time, follow your daily to-do lists and limit your outside commitments on workdays or days when you have more family or personal responsibilities.

Talk It Out–Communicate With Others

It makes sense that if journaling is a key starting point to understanding and coping, then communicating with others about what you are dealing with is also a vital means of dealing with your ever-changing situation. Open and honest communication helps reduce conflict and misunderstanding between you and your family, friends and others.

Sometimes we feel angry and resentful while dealing with chronic pain and fatigue.

There is a feeling of despair and frustration when we find ourselves falling behind in activities and tasks with those we love or with those we work with. Everything that once benefited from our energy and attention is pushed to the background, and we find we are mentally distracted and preoccupied with our illness.

At times we become so overwhelmed that we shut ourselves off from others and shut down necessary communication. Those around us cannot fully understand or even provide the necessary help we need if we do not find the courage to communicate with full transparency what we are going through.

It is surprising how often those around us wish to help, but because we are ashamed to ask or let them see our vulnerable moments, we find ourselves at odds with them and our condition.

If you don’t know where to start in communicating with others and feel overwhelmed with the stress of fibromyalgia, seeking the advice of a professional counselor can help you develop appropriate strategies to deal with your condition and other issues in your life.

Gaining back a measure of control will also help you better communicate with those around you.

Seek Out Support

Beyond professional counselors, no one understands what you are going through better than someone who is walking a similar journey. Online networks such as this are a great source of insight and support. Also, many communities have fibromyalgia support groups that meet weekly.

Ask your physician’s office for leads to support groups in your community.

Next page: Starla offers more tips on how to cope with fibromyalgia.

How to Cope With Fibromyalgia

Remember to Rest and Relax

At the end of each evening, I reach out to loved ones and give them my wishes to *“sleep well and have sweet dreams.”*

This is something that I desire for myself as well, but through the years of dealing with fibromyalgia, I’ve learned that sufficient sleep is often hard to come by. Part of coping with your condition and flare-ups hinges on how well you sleep at night.

There are things you can do to promote the chances of better sleep:

- **Make sure your body is prepared for rest.** You can't sleep if there is light in your room or if a television is blaring in another room.

- **Make sure your room is quiet, dark, and cool.** Use earplugs if you are sensitive to noise, and use a blackout blind or wear an eye mask to block light.
- **Eliminate afternoon caffeine from your diet, and exercise regularly – although not near bedtime.** Sometimes a snack that is high in carbohydrates can help induce sleep because it boosts levels of serotonin in your body, a chemical messenger that helps regulate mood, appetite and sleep.

Take Care of Yourself First

Many of us who struggle with the changes that fibromyalgia brings, are so accustomed to going, doing, and serving others that taking time to care for ourselves seems foreign to us. Still, the only way to cope with life with fibromyalgia and still be what we desire to be for others is to take care of ourselves.

Below are some tips for doing just that.

Learn to Say “No”

This one is especially difficult for me as I find joy in being there for others. Still, failing to set personal limits or saying "yes" to too many demands will make you feel overloaded. That will add to your already elevated stress level.

To help yourself say "no" to a persuasive friend or activity, think through the situation before you answer. Check your calendar, and weigh the alternatives. Involve family members or friends in the discussion about what to do.

Would another commitment stop you from getting the rest, exercise, and relaxation you need to feel well? Would it interfere with the priorities that are high on your list?

The desire to help others is commendable, but being all things to all people may hinder your healing and make you feel resentful, tired, and depressed. It is important to take a firm stand, so say "no," and mean it.

Make Time for Yourself Each Day

Work towards achieving an overall lifestyle balance. Make time to do the things you "want" to do as well as the things you "have" to do. People with fibromyalgia are faced with special demands that other healthy people do not have.

The task of coping with fatigue and pain each day makes it necessary to keep your priorities in order, so you have the energy to reach your daily goals.

I penned a motto several years ago after dealing with the struggles of fibromyalgia and the resulting lifestyle change it forced on me. It simply states, *“the being energizes the doing.”* When we take time to relax and enjoy simple pleasures for ourselves, it recharges us, so to speak, so that we have renewed energy for the daily task and people in our lives.

Exercise Regularly

An exercise routine is important for coping and easing symptoms of fibromyalgia. Because of the pain, trigger points and tender points, ongoing fatigue, and stiffness felt by people with fibromyalgia, many have become physically unfit.

Aerobic or conditioning exercises – such as walking, swimming, and cycling – have analgesic and antidepressant effects. Aerobic exercise can help enhance your sense of well-being and feeling of being in control.

Your doctor should be able to help in designing a program that is right for you and possibly even prescribing exercise therapy at a rehab, gym, or other facilities. I developed a routine of walking many years ago, and it not only became a great source of relief physically but emotionally – that quiet time on my “stroll” was an oasis away

from the struggles I faced for a while.

Use Relaxation Tools

There are many relaxation techniques you can use to both cope and ease daily tension, anxiety, and pain.

- **You might learn to relax with guided imagery or visualization.** Closing your eyes and thinking or focusing on something pleasant or peaceful can still your anxiety, and relax your mind, muscles, and emotion. Download an app that provides visuals and sounds designed for that purpose. I have an app downloaded on my phone called “Calm.” You can choose various scenes and sounds of nature to “escape to.” A couple of my favorites are the beach and gentle rainy days.
- **Meditation or prayer is another excellent coping mechanism.** When you meditate and experience the relaxation response, your body is allowed permission to switch from the pumping "fight or flight" response into a calmer, more peaceful mood. Studies show that when you step back from problems and use mind/body tools to relax, you produce brain waves consistent with serenity and happiness.
- **“Brain dump” everything.** The leader of our group instructed us to take five minutes each evening to write down all the thoughts, ideas, and “to do” lists that were on our mind. Then put the list aside and let go of our thoughts to simply enjoy our evening. When our mind is still focused on activity while our body is needing rest, we rob ourselves of the time needed to relax, recharge, and restore. Thinking positive thoughts will, in turn, allow us to reduce negative voices in our heads as well. This produces a much more optimistic attitude when you can do.

Soak in a Warm Bath

This way of coping is perhaps one of my most favorite. I am amazed at how much better I feel afterward. Not only am I relaxed, but my pain is reduced, and my fatigue melts away.

Relaxing in a warm bath, whirlpool bath, or sauna or standing under a warm shower serves two purposes.

First, it helps you to relax tense muscles, reduce pain, and move more easily. Second, some studies show that the warm, moist heat may raise levels of endorphins and decrease levels of stress hormones.

The Bottom Line...

While life before fibro might’ve been somewhat different to live with fibro, life is still yours for the making. The truth is, life is full of changes in our journey with or without illness. What we choose to do with our “today's,” and what we value need not change.

Somethings are not dependent on how active we are, how much energy we have or level of productivity we provide to people or things. Love of family is still a treasure. The laughter of friends is still a joy. Quiet moments are still blissful, and life is always worth pursuing its everyday miracles and unexpected blessings along the way.

Don’t let pain, fatigue or any of the other conditions of fibromyalgia rob more than they have to. It may zap your energy but not your purpose. It may slow your steps but not stop the music.