

Chronic fatigue syndrome is an illness that can have a devastating impact not just on your body, but on your mind and spirit. The **onslaught of symptoms, thoughts and feelings** can be crushing, allowing the illness to take even greater hold over you. It's important to **integrate the mind-body-spirit continuum** to live the healthiest life possible.

BODY MIND SPIRIT

BY LEO J. SHEA, PH.D., GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

Dealing with a chronic illness such as CFS is one of the most arduous and perplexing dilemmas that a human being can face. Its invasive presence not only attacks the human organic system but also poses challenges to the totality of the mind-body-spirit continuum, a human being's defense against the ravages of disease.

Unlike acute disease, CFS seems to incorporate an insidious onset that surreptitiously develops unchecked in the human system. Its nature is elusive and its plethora of symptoms can often lead to an erroneous medical diagnosis or to a psychiatric diagnosis that relegates the physical symptoms to a creation of the psyche. In either case, patients are left in a state of bewilderment that can lead to inaction, allowing the disease to gain greater control over the mind-body systems.

How often have CFS patients heard, "You're just too tired from overwork; you just need to slow down and you'll be fine." Or even worse, "I can't find anything wrong with you, maybe you should see a psychologist." Such messages imply patient responsibility, a psychosomatic illness or manufactured somatic symptoms. They are based in our inability to discover the physical/organic basis for the decline in function, leading to the conclusion that the symptoms presented are a malaise of the mind



or the spirit.

The “you’re just too tired” comment presupposes that you’re directly responsible for your functional decline. It also assumes that patients can initiate the necessary changes to ameliorate the situation. Unfortunately, the comment is based on a simplistic approach and offers no adjunct supportive techniques. The “I can’t find anything wrong with you” message ascribes a fantasized belief about the illness to patient psychopathology. Such messages, which invalidate a CFS patient’s illness, result in a splitting of the mind–body–spirit system at the diagnosis stage—and it’s precisely at this diagnosis stage that a CFS patient is most emotionally vulnerable and in need of support and validation.

Judith Leventhal, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist on the faculty of the New York University School of Medicine, has extensive experience in treating patients with chronic illnesses. She cautions, “These types of messages undermine self-confidence, erode self-esteem and exacerbate the sense of loss in the face of a chronic illness like CFS.”

To prevent this splitting, people with CFS must remember that they’re greater than the sum of individual components. The body, the mind and the spirit are interactive and interdependent elements that comprise the building blocks of our humanity. Much like bricks, motor and wood combine to construct a great mansion, the mind, body and spirit collectively combine to construct a higher, more complete being that merits human dignity and respect.

BODY From conception, we’re endowed with a body/soma with which we are in constant relationship. We see, we feel, we touch, we smell, we taste. We see ourselves grow and monitor the changes as milk teeth are replaced by permanent teeth, as adolescent changes occur in hair and musculature, and as sexual characteristics emerge. As we progress into adulthood, we monitor other bodily changes in skeletal and muscular structure due to such things as work, sports and child-bearing. Further on, we recognize changes that occur as we age and experience a decline in function. It’s this life-long experience with our bodies that allows us to monitor changes when they occur.

CFS patients recognize when their bodies are under attack, and it takes enormous energy to respond, to perform even simple daily chores or tasks. While the primary symptoms of debilitating fatigue, headache and

general malaise initially attack the body, as the disease takes hold in the system, CFS patients experience an onslaught of such symptoms as gastrointestinal problems, lymph node pain, sore throats, vision changes, night sweats, weight gain and multiple allergies. Dealing

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with and monitoring the multiple symptoms of the disease on a daily basis further compromises an already-depleted energy store.

For CFS patients it’s important to monitor and document these bodily changes. You know your own body and how you physically function. It is you who brings “your body” of knowledge to your physician to assist in making sense of your physical feelings, or symptoms. CFS patients need to seek a physician who is open to understanding these symptoms, not one who doubts the symptoms exist. Generally, when you experience a change in bodily function or symptoms, you know, based on experience with your own body, that something is wrong or at least different.

CFS patients need to continually remind themselves that they’re the primary caretakers of their bodies. The physician is the consultant hired by you to help make sense out of the extraordinary process that’s affecting your body.

MIND When we hear “It’s all in your mind,” we understandably assume that our symptoms, or the illness itself, are in doubt, stimulating a deep sense of distress. We must remember, however, that it takes the mind to understand our physical and emotional feelings. Once you’ve experienced an unusual somatic symptom or a series of them, it’s the mind that interprets these symptoms and allows you to determine if they’re momentary and passing, or longer lasting and more serious.

The mind collects the experiences of the senses. In doing so, it attempts to understand them, to name them, to make sense of them, to confront them and to seek ameliorative solutions. It’s the mind that processes the emotional impact of somatic sensations and helps to

maintain emotional balance. In taking cues from the body, the mind sends messages back and forth through the physical and emotional relay stations of the brain and constructs a method of reacting, commonly called behavior. The mind encourages us to deal not only with our symptoms, but with their diagnosis and treatment. The mind organizes and interprets the physical and emotional data and helps us decide what action to take.

To do this, the brain must be healthy and able to adequately perform its designated functions. In CFS patients, however, a number of brain functions are compromised. The ability to process information is often impacted, and attention to tasks becomes more limited, with patients sometimes forgetting what they're doing or supposed to be doing. Short-term memory problems occur and, when in conversation, CFS patients have difficulty finding the appropriate words to express thoughts or emotions. Because of this, patients may limit conversation with others or avoid social or professional situations where conversation is the primary focus. Organizational and planning abilities also become impaired, and people with CFS find they can no longer multitask. Tasks have to be divided into smaller segments and accomplished slowly, one step at a time.

Furthermore, the emotional aspects of the mind become compromised as physical symptoms increase. Emotional components such as sadness, depression and anxiety interact with cognitive deficits, and CFS patients often feel marginalized, different from the person they once were. If these emotions aren't competently addressed through therapy and other support systems, social and interpersonal isolation often occurs, and this can lead to more serious emotional states.

It's important, however, for people with CFS to remember that you have considerable control over compromised cognitive functions and deepening emotions. It's what you think about your ability to deal with the disease that influences how much control you have over functional limitations of the disease. This means it's of paramount importance to do such things as maintain a positive "can do" attitude, develop a list of daily/weekly tasks, focus on the future, incorporate a light exercise regimen and perform diaphragmatic breathing and relaxation exercises.

By giving yourself permission to "live," you stimulate the mind to produce powerful biochemicals that can activate a positive response and reduce the negative impact on your physical system. In this way, you can interactively use the functions of the mind to address a physically weakened state and encourage it to develop a repair process.

SPIRIT

The spirit in the tripartite mind–body–spirit model is represented by an intangible

force, greater than any human, that lifts us beyond ourselves and provides a glimpse into the possibilities beyond what the soma (body) and the psyche (mind) both individually and collectively can provide. It's an invisible fulcrum that balances the mind and the body.

The work of the spirit can be divided into two general areas: 1) the traditional system, a system of formulated religious writings, beliefs and structured rituals, and 2) the alternative system (often referred to as spirituality), a less defined and ritualistic system supporting the belief that an undefined vitality is present in the world that supports the body-mind processes and offers a sanctuary for peaceful inner focus and meaningful integration for the events of life.

In the traditional system, the work of the spirit can be gained, although rarely, through unmerited grace (given without any effort) or, more usually, through dedicated and consistent meditation and prayer. Prayer, which comes from the Latin *precarius* (something obtained by begging), is a universal method used by all religions to petition God, Jesus, Yahweh, Allah or other deities for relief from earthly situations that can't be solved through human intervention. This petitionary prayer is a plea for Divine intervention.

WHAT YOU FEEL IS REAL

Listen to what your body and mind are telling you.

Don't doubt yourself. You know yourself better than anyone else.

Share your concerns and thoughts with trusted, prudent others.

Schedule a medical appointment. Remember, the doctor is your paid consultant.

Get a second opinion if not satisfied. Don't be intimidated.

Accept your illness. It's the beginning of a road to a new victory.

Inventory your support systems—family, friends and medical and mental health professionals. Initiate a daily treatment plan, one that is positive and includes multiple doses of humor.

Set aside daily times for prayer, meditation and spiritual centering. Know that you are not alone.

Trust in life, in fellow humanity and in your spiritual beliefs.

Studies across the spectrum of illness have shown that prayer has a beneficial effect not only on the person who prays, but on the person who is the object of the prayer. Prayer has been shown to promote a feeling of wellness; reduce anxiety, depression and high blood pressure; and have a positive impact on cancer and cardiovascular patients, often extending their lifespan beyond medical expectancy.

A seminal study in the field of medically related spirituality was published by Randolph Byrd, M.D., in 1988 in the *Southern Medical Journal*. The study involved 393 coronary heart disease patients, who were admitted to a coronary care unit and divided into two groups. One group was “prayed for” and the other was “not prayed for.” The results showed that patients in the “prayed for” group had fewer instances of ventilation or intubation, required fewer drugs and contracted pneumonia less often than the “not prayed for” patients. Many other studies at major medical institutions with different populations have also demonstrated the effectiveness of prayer on the well-being of patients.

While the positive effects of meditation and prayer have been known for millennia by both Eastern and Western mystics and have been cited in the ancient religious texts of all the major faiths, most recently they have been verified by scientific researchers such as Herbert Benson, M.D., at Harvard’s Mind-Body Institute, Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts, Elmer and Alyce Green at Menninger Clinic and Harold G. Koenig, M.D., at Duke.

The alternative system is an ethical belief system which affirms that each person has the power to impact and directly contribute to the common good. The cumulative or uni-

versal effect constitutes a power that positively impacts all living beings and enriches their lives. It’s a power that’s largely based in the accepted general belief that you should “love others” and “treat others as you would wish to be treated.” This system typically does center on a God figure, but incorporates a universal understanding that all human beings have an innate and irrevocable right to freedom, human dignity, compassion and love.

Alternative beliefs can be developed and fostered in many ways, including through collective, smaller group interaction (meditation, discussion groups, social gatherings), natural and environmental elements (sunshine, mountains, oceans, land-

although one may predominate out of necessity at a given time. In the end, however, the human being maximally functions when the mind–body–spirit system is in harmonious balance, with each element reinforcing the others to ensure optimal health. ■

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scapes) creative stimulation (art, music) and meaningful personal interaction. It’s in the listening, in the hearing, in the seeing, in the touching and in the tasting (body) that a person experiences and interprets a feeling (mind) and understands and accepts a universal greatness beyond the particular or the individual (spirit).

No matter what system you ascribe to, it’s the power of your spiritual belief that influences your mind and body.

It’s important to remember that the mind–body–spirit system is always interactive and interdependent. No one piece stands alone,