



## **COUNSELLING THOSE WITH *MEDICALLY UNEXPLAINED SYMPTOMS***

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How do we counsel people with *Medically Unexplained Symptoms*, such as chronic fatigue and fibromyalgia?

### **Division in the medical camp:**

The medical profession is divided into two major camps, those who believe Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and its cousins (such as fibromyalgia) are legitimate diseases and those who believe they are merely bodily responses to stress.

This makes things very hard for the biblical counsellor. On one hand you have a person who appears to be suffering from disabling fatigue or pain, and on the other, a divided medical profession, who say it's a legitimate disease, a non-disease response to stress, or (a few) that it's all in the person's head.

Our purpose as biblical counsellors is not to resolve the medical debate. But we do need to help this person (and his or her family and friends) deal with the situation in a way that honours God.

### **Background information**

#### **Definitions:**

Chronic Fatigue:

*Chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) is a debilitating and complex disorder characterized by intense fatigue that is not improved by bed rest and that may be worsened by physical or mental activity. People with CFS most often function at a substantially lower level of activity than they were capable of before the onset of illness. The cause or causes of CFS have not been identified and no specific diagnostic tests are available. (from the Center for Disease Control, [www.cdc.gov/cfs/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/cfs/index.html))*

Chronic fatigue has also been described as "a cluster of symptoms that most people develop during times of stress." (quoted in Smith, *The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference*, 257)

Note:

To be diagnosed as suffering from chronic fatigue, the symptoms must have persisted or recurred during six or more consecutive months of illness and must not have predated the fatigue.

Common names:

- Chronic Fatigue and Immune Dysfunction Syndrome
- Yuppie Flu
- ME (myalgic encephalomyelitis)
- Chronic Candida
- Post Viral Fatigue Syndrome
- Historically it has been known by many names, including "the vapours."

Common victims:

*The female-male ratio is 3:1. The mean time to recovery is about two years ....*

*"Patients tend to be educated overachievers who are more likely to live in suburbia than in inner-city areas (hence the derisive term 'yuppie flu')." (Smith, *The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference*, 168, 169)*

The doctors' challenge:

*Fatigue is one of the most common complaints among patients seen in the primary care setting .... Unfortunately, fatigue is also among the most nonspecific of symptoms. (quoted in Smith, *The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference*, 167)*

Suggested causes of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome:

- Epstein-Barr virus

*It now seems clear that CFS is not caused exclusively by any single recognized infectious disease agent. (Center for Disease Control)*

- immune system problems
- allergies

- hormone and cortisol problems (leading to increased inflammation and irregular immune cell activities)
- blood pressure and pulse irregularities

#### Conclusion:

While one or more of these factors appear to contribute in the case of one person or another, none contributes in every occurrence of chronic fatigue.

*The cause or causes of CFS remain unknown, despite a vigorous search. While a single cause for CFS may yet be identified, another possibility is that CFS represents a common endpoint of disease resulting from multiple causes. (Center for Disease Control)*

#### Restated:

There may not be one source of chronic fatigue. It appears that a lot of different roads can lead to the final destination of chronic exhaustion.

#### Fibromyalgia:

*The name fibromyalgia is simply the symptoms translated into Latin .... "connective tissue and muscle pain." ....*

*The person must have widespread pain for more than 3 months and pain at any 11 of 18 defined tender points. (Smith, *The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference*, 250)*

#### Connections with depression:

*About two-thirds of those diagnosed with fibromyalgia have "a lifetime history of major depression." (Smith, *The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference*, 258)*

#### The chicken-or-the-egg dilemma:

Opinion is divided over whether the person's unrelenting body pains are the *cause* of their depression or if the bodily aches and pains are physical *consequences* of their severe depression.

#### Divided medical opinion:

*The scientific literature presents a contradictory picture .... Many consider it a definite disease of the body .... [Others believe] that all these people ... are simply responding to stress in their lives. (255)*

### Three categories of people with *Medically Unexplained Symptoms*:

#### 1) Fakers.

There can be no doubt that a small percentage of people who claim chronic fatigue or chronic body pain are proverbial sluggards, hoping to avoid work and life responsibilities by means of their self-professed medical condition.

*Proverbs 19:24. The sluggard buries his hand in the dish, but will not even bring it back to his mouth.*

*Proverbs 21:25. The desire of the sluggard puts him to death, for his hands refuse to work.*

*Proverbs 26:16. The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can give a discreet answer.*

#### 2) A real, but undiagnosed physical disease.

The person may have a real, but *as-of-yet unidentified* physical disease that is causing the fatigue or muscular pain. It may be undiagnosed because the person has not been to the doctor or the doctors have not yet run the correct tests to identify the problem. Less likely, but also possible (since medical knowledge is still advancing), is the possibility that the person's disease has not yet been identified by medical science.

#### 3) Spiritual problems with physical consequences.

In this case, the person's pain or fatigue is real, but it's source is primarily spiritual, not physical. Their unwise or sinful responses to life situations such as stress and sickness have led to physical consequences.

*In most cases when the doctor says he can find nothing wrong with the body that would cause a particular symptom, the symptom is due to responses to situations in everyday life. (Smith, *The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference*, 43)*

Note:

It might be important to help the counselee who is in category 3 to understand the difference between the following two words:

*Hypochondria:*

The practice of imagining symptoms or sickness that one doesn't have.

*Psychosomatic:*

Having real physical symptoms that stem from one's mental and emotional state rather than an organic disease.

Point:

Hypochondriacs imagine symptoms. In contrast, psychosomatic conditions are not imaginary; they just can't be traced to a demonstrable physical source. The difference is significant, and might help the person find relief from the fear that the pain or fatigue is "all in my head."

Her genuine physiological pain or fatigue might have its initial source in bad choices rather than organic malfunction, but the symptoms are very real, whatever their source.

### **Different approaches required:**

Fakers:

Fakers need a good dose of Proverbs on the sluggard, identifying what idol they are serving by falsifying or exaggerating their symptoms.

The genuine:

To back up the proverbial dump truck and unload Proverbs on the sluggard on someone who very much wants to work and to be active but can't muster the strength to do so would be unfair and cruel. Therefore, a counsellor needs to distinguish those who, over time, are obviously languishing in the sluggard category from those who are in the second and third categories.

Three questions that expose fakers:

1. What does the counselee hope to gain by his or her professed fatigue or pain?

Does he like lying on the couch and watching rugby re-runs while his wife goes out to work five days a week? Is she escaping painful emotional family situations by using her symptoms as a shield to hide behind?

2. What is he or she losing?

If the counselee is unable to do things he or she really enjoys, it is unlikely that the symptoms are faked.

3. How much effort is the counselee willing to exert to carry out life responsibilities that are within the limitations of his or her symptoms?

There is a categorical difference between a person who tries her best within the limits of her physical condition, and the person who refuses to or is openly reluctant to do what she is capable of doing (however limited that activity may be). If all she can do in the house is wash the dishes once a day, but she does so willingly, then she is probably not faking.

Summary:

Fakers are usually exposed by their selfish motives and their unwillingness to cheerfully do what they can.

Note:

Distinguishing those who have a real-but-undiagnosed physical disease from those who are merely mishandling spiritual issues such as stress or perfectionism may well be impossible, but thankfully, neither is it necessary. Since the spiritual problems of the second and third categories are essentially the same, we can address those problems and let the doctors probe for an underlying physical disease if necessary.

**A side note on helping a counselee interact with his or her doctors:**

It is not unusual for a person with chronic fatigue or pain to have seen a dozen doctors or more in her pursuit of a solution. The following might help you counsel her on how to make her medical consultations more helpful.

1. Accept that vague symptoms tend to lead to vague diagnoses. This doesn't mean the symptoms aren't real; they just aren't specific enough to allow the doctor to pinpoint a source. In light of this, realise that a good doctor might ask you to wait until more symptoms or more specific symptoms develop.
2. In spite of amazing technology such as MRI scans, most people have a thousand unexplained (and at this point *unexplainable*) symptoms every day. We must accept this especially in cases of chronic fatigue and pain, without in any way doubting the concern or skill of our doctors.

3. Avoid pressuring doctors to run tests they believe are unnecessary. Don't be the patient for whom the doctor orders a test just to get rid of you so he can move on to his next patient.
4. Don't give in or be offended when a doctor, having exhausted the obvious possible physiological diagnoses, defaults to prescribing anti-depressants, even though you aren't depressed and don't believe anti-depressants are the solution even if you were.
5. Don't be angry or despondent when a doctor (most likely unintentionally) makes you feel as if you are imagining your symptoms because nothing has shown up in the blood tests.
6. Ask the doctor, "What would you be doing if you were in my situation?" Personal opinion mingled with professional opinion can be very helpful in making decisions about what further investigation or treatment options are worth pursuing.

What kind of doctor to look for:

Usually patients with chronic syndromes appreciate the following in a doctor:

- A doctor who patiently listens to their story and symptoms.
- A doctor who gives explanations of the known medical options, even when he or she can't pinpoint the problem. Such explanations assure the patient that the doctor cares, and that he knows his field well enough that some obvious problem isn't slipping by unnoticed.
- A doctor who draws them into the evaluation process in an interactive way.
- A doctor who exhibits a bit of a "detective" attitude, willing to think a bit more deeply once the obvious, standard problems have been excluded.
- A doctor who is willing to give attention to the management of the symptoms (even if the source of the symptoms has not been decisively identified).

Three basic questions:

- What is your problem?
  - What does *God* say about your problem?
  - What does God say *to do* about your problem?
- **What is your problem?**

Medically unexplained, chronic, disabling physical exhaustion and/or bodily pain.

➤ **What does God say about your problem?**

The spiritual-physical connection:

Human beings are spiritual-physical creatures, so both the physical aspects and the spiritual aspects of medically unexplained symptoms need to be addressed. As biblical counsellors, we will focus primarily on the spiritual.

*Proverbs 4:20-22. My son, give attention to my words; Incline your ear to my sayings. Do not let them depart from your sight; keep them in the midst of your heart. For they are life to those who find them and health to all their body.*

*Proverbs 3:7-8. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your body and refreshment to your bones.*

*Proverbs 14:30. A tranquil heart is life to the body, but passion [zeal or jealousy] is rotteness to the bones.*

*Proverbs 15:30. Bright eyes gladden the heart; good news puts fat on the bones.*

*Proverbs 17:22. A joyful heart is good medicine, but a broken spirit dries up the bones.*

Point:

Turning away from evil, keeping God's word, humility, godly tranquility, and a joyful disposition strongly influence physical health. In other words, whatever the person's physical symptoms, in these cases there will almost certainly be a spiritual component as well.

➤ **What does God say *to do* about your problem?**

*Physical aspects.*

Guiding principle:

Unless your data gathering clearly suggests that the person is just a sluggard, assume the person's symptoms are *real*, discouraging, and to some degree, disabling.

Smith:

*To help a person with this condition, let me repeat an important fact. To your counselee, these symptoms are real, not imaginary (or "in her head"). She does hurt physically. As you counsel her, you must accept this fact .... Accept the counselee's condition as a fact and use the Bible to give hope and victory in a condition for which there is no apparent long-term relief. (The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference, 263)*

*These symptoms are not imagined, even though an organic cause is not found. (185)*

While biblical counsellors are (in most cases) not medical doctors, there is some general advice that can be given on the physical side of things.

General, common sense advice:

- If he or she has not done so, encourage the counselee to get a full medical check-up.

A check-up might uncover a readily identifiable and treatable physical condition. If the problem is fatigue and headaches, encourage them to get an eye exam as well.

- Encourage the counselee to read reputable material that will calm her fears about some underlying, life-threatening condition (suggestion: the appropriate chapters in *The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference* and the Center for Disease Control website)

In regard to fibromyalgia:

*Education also provides symptomatic benefit. It is of great benefit to the person to know "that death or organ or tissue damage will not occur as a result of this condition, but that there is no known cure and that the condition is likely to be chronic with a fluctuating course." .... "Education probably does not reduce the pain's severity, but it can decrease the patients' concern that another condition, such as cancer, may have been missed." (Smith, The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference, 253)*

In regard to chronic fatigue:

*"It is important for them to realize that no definitive diagnostic or therapeutic approaches exist .... No single remedy has yet proven consistently beneficial." (in Smith, The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference, 178)*

Point:

Information like this might keep your counselee from pursuing unnecessary medical treatments and from worrying (which will only exacerbate his or her symptoms).

- Consider possible allergens or toxins in the home or workplace.
- Assuming it does not violate the doctors' advice, encourage sensible sleep patterns, eating habits, and mild exercise.

Ryan Penny:

*Many cases of fatigue and pain (both physical and emotional) can respond very positively to basic common sense in terms of lifestyle. Some good counsel might include a week or three of more sleep, a better diet, more water, [and] some extra physical exercise ...*  
(unpublished notes on chronic fatigue)

- Warn against the danger of seeking medical treatments beyond their financial means.
- Help the person establish a schedule that will allow for and encourage recovery.

Ryan Penny:

*For those with legitimate physical disability, counsel "not to overdo it" is important. Push/crash scenarios are counterproductive and will likely slow down any possibility of recovery and lead to frustration.* (unpublished notes on chronic fatigue)

The need for a realistic schedule:

In most cases of chronic fatigue, the pre-onset condition includes high levels of physical or emotional stress. You might need to help the counselee (and her family) rework her schedule and life responsibilities, exercising the discipline of rest so that her body can recover.

Significant or full recovery is possible in most cases of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, but recovery time is usually between eighteen months and three years. During that period the counselee will need to regulate her schedule carefully so as not to exacerbate the problem or experience a relapse. Having pushed too hard and paying the

consequences for it, like an athlete who has over trained, she must allow her body time to recover.

Note:

On occasion, you might also need to warn a person who is headed toward this situation to take his or her foot off the accelerator pedal of life. The well is deep—a two-year recovery period on average. Don't fall into it.

*Spiritual aspects.*

### **Uncovering the potential spiritual sources:**

Look for common, garden-variety sins such as men-fearing, perfectionism, and works righteousness. It is no accident that most people who struggle with these conditions are driven people who regularly function under high levels of *self*-pressure. These conditions are described as ...

- *... a cluster of symptoms that most people develop during times of stress.* (Smith, *The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference*, 257)
- *Physical or emotional stress ... is commonly reported as a pre-onset condition in CFS patients ...* (Center for Disease Control)

Smith:

*As you counsel persons with this label, keep in mind the potential that the fatigue could be the result of their not handling various aspects of life in a biblical fashion.* (*The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference*, 187)

Spiritual sources to consider:

1. Works righteousness or perfectionism.

It is possible the person drives herself relentlessly because she feels she must impress God, making herself acceptable to Him by means of her achievements in the workplace or her family, rather than trusting in the completed work of Christ.

Romans 5:1. *Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ ...*

Comment:

A "Roman Catholic" shared-responsibility (part God, part me) view of justification might underlie the driven attitude common in many of these cases.

## 2. Men-fearing.

Does the counselee's driven mentality arise from men-fearing? Has her insatiable, idolatrous desire for the approval of others pushed her to unhealthy levels of physical and emotional stress? (Resource: *When People Are Big and God Is Small*, by Ed Welch)

Proverbs 29:25. *The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted.*

Proverbs 14:26-27. *In the fear of the LORD there is strong confidence, and his children will have refuge. The fear of the LORD is a fountain of life ...*

## 3. Success-driven living.

Proverbs 15:16. *Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and turmoil with it.*

Ecclesiastes 2:22-23. *For what does a man get in all his labor and in his striving with which he labors under the sun? Because all his days his task is painful and grievous; even at night his mind does not rest. This too is vanity.*

Summary:

Whom are they trying to please?

- self (success-driven living)
- others (men-fearing)
- God—inappropriately (a wrong view of justification)
- God—appropriately (out of love, fully understanding their standing in Christ)

## 4. A lack of godly enjoyment in daily tasks.

Ecclesiastes 3:22. *I have seen that nothing is better than that man should be happy in his activities, for that is his lot. For who will bring him to see what will occur after him?*

Ecclesiastes 5:18, 20. *Here is what I have seen to be good and fitting: to eat, to drink and enjoy oneself in all one's labor in which he toils under the sun during the few years of his life which God has given him; for this is his reward .... For he will not often consider the years of his life, because God keeps him occupied with the gladness of his heart.*

Point:

God is glorified not only in the diligent execution of our duties, but in our *enjoyment* of them as well. Enjoyment provides a biblical balance to a strong sense of responsibility, duty, and obligation. (Helpful resource: *Desiring God* by John Piper)

#### 5. Proud refusal to rest when sick or run-down

Mark 6:30-32. *The apostles gathered together with Jesus; and they reported to Him all that they had done and taught. And He said to them, "Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while." (For there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.) They went away in the boat to a secluded place by themselves.*

Ecclesiastes 4:6. *One hand full of rest is better than two fists full of labor and striving after wind.*

#### 6. Views God as an unpleasable tyrant.

Ecclesiastes 9:7. *Go then, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works.*

### Helping the person cope victoriously

Smith:

*God has a purpose for illness, and it is of benefit to the sick person. Getting over the illness should not be the primary goal. (The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference, 31)*

Point:

The goal of life is Christ-likeness, whether the person's exhaustion or pain are relieved or not.

*The focus of the day must not be on conquering fatigue but on pleasing God, no matter how she feels. (Smith, The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference, 191)*

### **Nine key principles:**

#### 1. God's sovereignty.

God is sovereign over sickness, both its onset and removal.

*Ecclesiastes 7:14. In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider—God has made the one as well as the other so that man will not discover anything that will be after him.*

*Exodus 4:11. The LORD said to him, "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?"*

#### 2. God's support.

*1 Corinthians 10:13. No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.*

#### 3. Unbiblical expectations.

Because this is a sin-cursed world, physical sickness is "normal." In a sense, it is more expected than physical health.

*Psalm 30:6. Now as for me, I said in my prosperity, "I will never be moved."*

*Ecclesiastes 1:13. It is a grievous task which God has given to the sons of men to be afflicted with.*

Smith on the fragility of life:

*The Bible teaches that life is very transient, and thus good health is very transient. Disease reminds us that the curse of sin affects all people, and all will die with or without sickness unless the Lord returns first. (The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference, 33)*

#### 4. Eternal perspective.

Hope is kept alive by remembering the fact that God will relieve all painful or disabling physical conditions in heaven.

Colossians 3:2. *Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.*

Revelation 21:4-5. *He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new"*

...

#### 5. Thankfulness.

*One important evidence of right thinking is the counselee's thanking of God for the fatigue. (The Christian Counselor's Medical Desk Reference, 190)*

1 Thessalonians 5:18. *In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

Comment:

Initially, the person may find it difficult to be thankful for his *symptoms*. However, the person can start by thankfully embracing *what God is teaching him* through his pain or exhaustion. That gets the thankfulness juices flowing.

#### 6. Cheerful attitude.

Proverbs 15:15. *All the days of the afflicted are bad, but a cheerful heart has a continual feast.*

Proverbs 17:22. *A joyful heart is good medicine, but a broken spirit dries up the bones.*

#### 7. A humble acceptance of help from others.

John 13:8. *Peter said to Him, "Never shall You wash my feet!"*

1 Peter 5:5. *... clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.*

The driven person is used to being self-sufficient, and in fact, probably takes pride in not needing others' assistance. Such a person will need help to become *easy to help*—receiving assistance from people around her for daily tasks she used to (and desperately wants to) do for herself.

8. A condition-sensitive schedule.

Penny:

*For those with legitimate physical disability, counsel "not to overdo it" is important. Push/crash scenarios are counterproductive and will likely slow down any possibility of recovery ... (unpublished notes on chronic fatigue)*

9. My weakness demonstrates Christ's strength:

*2 Corinthians 12:9-10. And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.*

Penny:

*Knowing that they can honour God and praise Him even when they have genuine physical restrictions can be greatly encouraging for those who are genuinely ill and who desperately don't want to be. (unpublished notes on chronic fatigue)*

MacArthur:

*When God declared to Paul in answer to his prayer, "My grace is sufficient for you," He affirmed the total sufficiency of His grace for every need in life—to believe the gospel; to understand and apply the Word to all the issues of life; to overcome sin and temptation; to endure suffering, disappointment, and pain; to obey God; to serve Him effectively; and to worship Him. God's grace was sufficient for the deepest pain Paul (or any other believer) could ever experience. (2 Corinthians, MNTC, 404)*

Point:

God uses physical weakness to burn away pride and self-confidence; therefore, I can be content with weaknesses, for when I am weak, He is strong.

A note on counselling family and friends:

Family and friends will need encouragement to be patient and supportive in these situations. It is typical for people's initial sympathy and support to leak away over time as they grow frustrated with the counselee's inability to carry out ordinary daily tasks without any "real" medical reasons for his or her limitations.

Patient, gentle, sustained servanthood is the key, and friends and family will usually require some instruction and encouragement to stay the course.