Gentle exercise healing

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Now Contributor

Exercise is probably the last thing on your mind if you suffer from chronic pain or fatigue. However, gentle activity does aid in rehabilitation. We were made to move. Movement facilitates the function of every operating system in the human body. Sit still and you'll become ill.

About 20 years ago, chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) ended my competitive bodybuilding career. I developed a severe case of laryngitis directly after having my wisdom teeth pulled. I should have expected this after a year of poor sleep and inconsistent eating due to intense workouts, pursing two busy careers and raising two young children. My weakened immune system finally announced, "Enough, you idiot – we're shutting down!"

For months I could only lie in bed. Just lifting my head off the pillow was a workout. Exercise? I didn't want to think about it! But I'm glad I did. Of course, nutrition and relaxation techniques were also critical in my healing process. But exercise is necessary too and shouldn't be avoided by those with CFS, fibromyalgia, Crohn's disease and other immunity and chronic pain disorders. Here's why:

- As the body becomes stronger, energy levels improve, and fatigue may become less frequent and severe. Physical activity enlarges mitochondria, the energy-producing part of the cell.
- A stronger and more flexible body can help reduce pain in muscles and joints – especially helpful for arthritis.
- Studies show regular gentle to moderate exercise strengthens the immune system.
- Exercise improves mood by sending more oxygen to the brain (which also aids in clearer thinking!) and it stimulates the "feel good," "pain killing" hormones like endorphins.
- Some types of exercise, like Pilates and yoga, are known for their core strengthening abilities. The core muscles include the abdominals, lower back and pelvic area. Strengthening these muscles deep in the torso can be helpful to those with colitis or Crohn's disease.
- The accomplishment felt after completing a workout or reaching an exercise goal is empowering! This is important for emotional health, often compromised by chronic illness.
- Regular exercise promotes deeper sleep.
- Exercise offers stress relief. A stronger circulatory system slows the heart rate, so it won't rise as high and as quickly in response to anxiety situations. You're able to keep your cool much easier.

Unfortunately, the chronic pain of most disorders combined with lack of sleep leads to exhaustion, which leads to physical inactivity. This deconditions and weakens the muscles, making the disorder worse.

Get gentle exercise, especially on your better days. Pace yourself. Experiment to see how much exercise is right for you. Consult your physician and a certified personal trainer for advice.

Try small amounts of exercise or stretches throughout the day. Being overactive will drain you, but small amounts of light exercise will help improve energy levels by raising metabolic rate. If walking to the mailbox or even around the living room is too fatiguing, don't push yourself to do more than that at first. Keep walking that short distance each time you exercise, and soon you'll find you can take a few steps more. Anything is better than nothing.

Today, I enjoy good health and an active lifestyle. However, even though it's been 18 years since developing CFS, I still have to monitor the intensity and length of my physical exertions. If I push myself too hard, I find I'm physically drained for a few days afterward.

There's no need to stress your body past your individual limit, even if you have good health. Exercise should be enjoyable too. So get moving and have fun!

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