

**Managing Feelings**  
**Self-Help III: Winter 2012**

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## Introduction

Self-Help III (Living Your Plan) extends the process of developing your unique self-management plan, a task you began when you filled out the worksheets in Self-Help II (Creating Your Plan).

This course is part of the second stage: implementation. As with the introductory class, we will have weekly targets and discussion questions based on a theme for the quarter.

The theme for this term is **Managing Feelings**. Emotions such as sadness, worry, frustration and guilt are common and understandable responses to long-term illness. They add their own challenges to the task of managing CFS and FM. This term, we will explore ways to tame emotions and turn them into positive forces.

### **The 1% Solution**

Living with CFS and/or fibromyalgia can feel overwhelming at times, but there are many things you can do to regain control. This is a gradual process, changing one or two things at a time, but used consistently it can be transforming. Slow and steady wins the race.

Two disclaimers:

First, this text will not make you better. Only you can do that. The text and the lessons will give you tools for feeling better and the class will offer you support, but you have to do the work.

Second, learning to live well with a long-term illness requires hard work, determination and patience. You will probably feel discouraged at times. When that happens, we hope you remember that many people before you have had similar feelings and have gone on to improve, one step at a time. The keys to improvement are a willingness to adapt and consistent use of the tools of self-management, especially pacing and stress management.

## 1: Emotions in CFS & FM - An Overview

Feelings such as sadness, worry, frustration and guilt are common and understandable responses to long-term illness. They are a reaction to the changes, limitations and uncertainty brought by illness. Because emotions are so common in long-term illness and so powerful, managing them deserves a place in your self-management plan.

There are two additional reasons to address emotions. First, CFS and fibromyalgia tend to make emotional reactions stronger than they were before and harder to control. The technical term is *labile*. People often say they cry more frequently, get upset more easily or have more angry outbursts than before they were ill. As one student in our program wrote, "Just recognizing that emotions are heightened as a result of CFS really helped me. Before learning that, I was quite puzzled by why I got upset about little things."

Second, feelings generated by being ill can create a vicious cycle. For example, being in constant pain can trigger worries about the future. Worry leads to muscle tension, which, in turn, increases pain. You can interrupt this cycle in several ways, two of which are to use relaxation to reduce muscle tension and to change your "self-talk" to reduce worry.

The process by which feelings intensify symptoms occurs even with positive emotions, as suggested in a comment from another person in our program who said, "I cried at one of the classes because I was so happy to be around people who understood me. Almost immediately, I had an attack of brain fog." Any experience that triggers the production of adrenaline intensifies emotions and often makes symptoms worse as well.

Feelings, like other aspects of long-term illness, can be managed. Some strategies you've encountered earlier in our program may be useful for managing the emotions triggered by CFS and FM. As noted above, relaxation techniques, in addition to their use for stress reduction, can short-circuit the feedback effect in which symptoms and emotions reinforce one another. Also, changing your thinking using Cognitive Therapy may be help. This approach has been proven to be especially effective for treating anxiety and depression. Another general approach is to identify those situations (and sometimes people) that trigger strong emotions and plan a strategy of response ahead of time. Often, avoiding or minimizing stressful situations can reduce emotions.

In addition to self-help measures, the management of emotions can include professional help. Emotions such as depression and anxiety can be caused or intensified by changes in brain chemistry and may be treated using prescription anti-depressants or anti-anxiety medications. Also, counseling can be helpful. Talking with a therapist about the problems triggered by your illness does not imply that "it's all in your head." Rather, counseling offers help dealing with a difficult situation. The help may include support, suggestions of coping strategies and perspective on your situation. If you think talking with a counselor might be helpful, you might seek out one who specializes in treating people with long-term illness.

## **2: Strategies for Depression**

Depression is very common in people with CFS and fibromyalgia. This should not be surprising, given the effects of ongoing symptoms as well as the disruptions and uncertainty created by illness.

Depression may be triggered by a sense of helplessness, by fear, frustration and anxiety, by loss, or by uncertainty about the future. Signs of depression include feelings of unhappiness or sadness, lack of interest in friends or activities, isolation, suicidal thoughts, and loss of self-esteem. Serious or long-term depression or thoughts of suicide call for immediate help from a doctor, therapist or suicide-prevention service.

There are two types of depression associated with CFS and fibromyalgia. One type is called situational depression, which means depression that occurs as a response to a particular set of circumstances, in this case having your life turned upside down by long-term illness. Self-management strategies such as those described below are usually helpful in response to this type of depression.

Depression may be biochemical as well, created by changes in the functioning of the brain. Prolonged stress may alter our biochemistry, causing depression. Self-management strategies may also be useful for this type of depression, but treatment normally includes medication as well.

Everyone has times when they feel unhappy or sad. We can recognize that these feelings are likely to occur from time to time and plan how to respond. Here are a dozen strategies to consider for combating depression.

### **Get Help**

If you are seriously depressed, suicidal or have been depressed for some time, get help now. Phone a suicide prevention center, talk to your doctor, see a psychologist or call a friend. If your situation is not urgent but depression reduces your ability to do your normal daily activities, you should consider professional help: counseling, medications or both.

### **Get Active**

Depression produces hopelessness, an attitude that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Counteract those feelings by taking actions, such as those listed below, that have a good chance of helping. Being active changes mood; also, successes promote hope.

### **Establish Good Habits**

Both keeping to a daily routine regardless of how you feel and forcing yourself to do things even if you don't want to counteract the inertia of depression. Your daily round of activities will depend on the severity of your illness, and might include things like getting dressed, making the bed, cooking meals, taking a walk and watching a favorite TV program.

**Exercise**

Exercise is a natural anti-depressant. It relieves tension, lessens stress and improves mood. Most exercise also involves being out of the house, thus bringing the added benefit of a change of scene.

**Use Problem Solving**

Taking action to solve a problem lifts the spirit as well as having practical benefits. Doing something counteracts the sense of helplessness, replacing it with a sense of control and accomplishment.

**Rest**

Some depression seems to be associated with physical symptoms, such as fatigue and pain, so depression can be a sign of having done too much. Resting to reduce these symptoms can also improve mood. One person says, "I can usually tell when I am doing more than my body can handle because I start to get depressed, not to mention short tempered and cranky."

**Change Your Thinking**

If you have a tendency to think of the worst that might happen, you can retrain yourself to speak soothingly and realistically when you're worried or depressed. For example, you can remind yourself that periods of bad feelings end. Change your mental climate by noticing what's going well and congratulating yourself on your accomplishments.

**Do Something Pleasant**

Pleasurable activities offer a distraction from symptoms and help create a good mood. The key is to find things that absorb your attention. Such activities might include reading, listening to music, sitting in the sun, taking a walk, doing crafts, solving puzzles, watching a movie and spending time with friends.

**Stay Connected**

Supportive human contact is very soothing. Calling a friend or getting together to talk, share a meal or see a movie counteracts isolation, preoccupation with problems and the low mood often associated with chronic illness. Just explaining yourself can give you perspective.

**Consider Medications**

If your depression is biochemical in origin, you may be helped by an anti-depressant medication. On the other hand, tranquilizers and narcotic painkillers intensify depression, so if you are depressed, it may be due partially to a medication side effect. If you suspect this, check with your doctor about a change of medication or a reduced dosage.

**Help Others**

Get involved with something larger than yourself to counteract isolation and preoccupation with self that often accompany illness and to rebuild self-esteem. Helping others might involve a regular commitment, like leading a support group, or something as

simple as a phone call to an older relative, checking in with an old friend or trading favors.

**Manage Stress**

Controlling stress can help you manage your emotions, because stress tends to make emotions more intense.

In the worksheet below, check the strategies you have used and rate their helpfulness from 0 (not at all helpful) to 10 (very helpful). Also, check those you would like to use in the future.

<b>Managing Depression</b>	<b>Tried Y/N</b>	<b>Rating (0 - 10)</b>	<b>Use in Future</b>
Counseling / therapy			
Anti-depressant medications			
Keeping active			
Keeping daily routines			
Exercise			
Problem solving			
Resting			
Change negative thinking			
Pleasurable activities			
Staying connected			
Check medication side effects			
Help others			
Manage stress			

### 3: Planning for Depression

Everyone has times when they feel unhappy or sad. We can recognize that these feelings are likely to occur from time to time and plan how to respond, so we'll know what to do when a time of low spirits comes.

#### **Mental or Physical Checklist**

One way to prepare for depression is to create a mental or physical checklist of anti-depression strategies. You might title it Things That Help Me Up When I'm Feeling Down, with items like the following:

- **Be Active:** Depression makes me feel hopeless and lethargic. I counteract those feelings by being as active as my physical ability allows.
- **Use Positive Self-Talk:** I remind myself that feeling blue didn't last in the past, so it probably won't this time either.
- **Stay Connected:** Depression is isolating, so I make sure to reach out to others, even if it's just a quick call to check in on how others are doing.
- **Maintain a Schedule:** Keeping to a daily routine –no matter how I feel—helps me to counteract depression. Forcing yourself to do things, even if you don't want to, counteracts the inertia of depression.

#### **Letter to Yourself**

Some people write letters to themselves, composed when they felt well and meant to be read when they are down. (See sample to be included with week #3 lesson.)

#### **Two Special Anti-Depression Strategies**

One person in our program has created two special anti-depression strategies. The first, called the Treasure Box of Pleasantries, is a notebook containing compliments she has received, photos of places she has visited or would like to see, plus treasured notes, photos and cards. When her spirits are down, she picks them up by going through the box.

The second strategy, which she calls The 100 Hours Program, is a way to stay active and give herself a sense of purpose when her spirits are especially low. She scripts a period of up to 100 hours with "every special, pleasant and meaningful activity I can think of." Depending on her functional level, she might schedule hair and massage appointments or lunch with friends. In addition, she has a list of 50 activities she can do on her own. They include catching up on unread magazines, watching uplifting or interesting movies, perusing picture books and preparing easy-to-fix meals.

Everything is worked into a schedule, which she keeps in a binder. She says that usually by the end of the time she is back to normal. The most important part is that "I don't have to think 'what do I do now'. I've planned it all out beforehand."

## **4: Anxiety & Worry**

Given the vulnerabilities we feel and the uncertainty about the future, it's not surprising that anxiety and worry are common reactions to CFS and FM. Here are eight strategies that are often helpful in counteracting anxiety and worry. For more suggestions, see "Fifty Tips on the Management of Worry Without Using Medication" in the book *Worry* by Edward Hallowell.

### **Practice Stress Reduction**

Learning relaxation and other stress reduction techniques can help reduce the intensity of your emotional reactions and, by doing so, reduce the echo effect in which emotions and symptoms amplify one another. A regular stress reduction practice can also lower "background worry," the ongoing anxiety that results from long-term stress.

### **Use Problem Solving**

Taking action to solve a problem has a double payoff. You reduce or eliminate a practical concern that is bothering you and the process of taking action reduces anxiety.

### **Change Your Thinking**

If you have a tendency to think of the worst that might happen, you can take steps to short-circuit the process in which your thoughts increase your anxiety. One antidote is to retrain yourself to speak soothingly when worried, saying things like "I've been here before and survived" or "this is probably not as bad as it seems." Also, you can do "reality checks" by testing your fears against facts and by asking for feedback from others. Ask whether you are experiencing good worry, which helps you formulate plans, or toxic worry, which is unproductive and paralyzing.

### **Stay Connected**

Simple human contact is often very soothing. Calling a friend or getting together to talk, share a meal or see a movie counteracts isolation, distracts you from preoccupation with problems, and provides reassurance.

### **Exercise**

One of the best treatments for worry and a natural anti-anxiety agent, exercise relieves tension, lessens stress and improves mood.

### **Pursue Pleasure**

Reading, music, good conversation and other activities in which you can become immersed help change mood.

### **Don't Worry Alone**

The act of sharing a worry almost always reduces its size and emotional weight. Discussion may help you find solutions and almost always makes the worry feel less threatening. Putting a worry into words translates it from the realm of imagination into something concrete and manageable. Seek out people who can offer support and reassurance.

### Consider Counseling and Medications

Counseling and therapy can make worries more manageable. Also, just as drugs can help with depression, some people find that medications help them deal with anxiety. A drug will not be a complete solution to problems of anxiety, but it can be part of a comprehensive response.

In the worksheet below, check the strategies you have used and rate their helpfulness from 0 (not at all helpful) to 10 (very helpful). Also, check those you would like to use in the future.

<b>Managing Anxiety &amp; Worry</b>	<b>Tried Y/N</b>	<b>Rating (0 – 10)</b>	<b>Use in Future</b>
Use relaxation & other stress management tools			
Practice problem solving			
Change negative thinking			
Stay connected			
Exercise			
Pursue pleasure			
Don't worry alone			
Consider counseling / therapy			
Consider medications			

## 5: Frustration & Anger

Frustration and anger are understandable reactions to chronic illness. Being sick is frustrating, since it brings ongoing symptoms, uncertainty about the future, and loss of control. Further, irritability seems to be a symptom of CFS and fibromyalgia.

Self-management can make frustration manageable. General strategies such as pacing and stress management help reduce the sources of frustration. For example, by using pacing you can stabilize your life, reducing the swings between high symptoms and periods of remission, and making life more predictable. Stress reduction practices can help you relax, reducing your susceptibility to frustration. In both instances, techniques used for another purpose can reduce frustration as well.

Here are six additional strategies used by people in our program to deal with frustrations created by being ill. They focus on the goal of finding non-harmful ways to acknowledge and express anger.

### **Get Support**

Expressing anger by talking it out with someone who is not the target of your frustration can release the feeling. As one student said, "The frustration and rage I felt about becoming ill has eased considerably since I joined a supportive group. I feel lucky to find a place to vent, be accepted and feel understood."

### **Write**

Putting experience in words can be helpful. Psychologist James Pennebaker has found that people have fewer health problems if they write about traumatic events in a way that combines factual description and emotional reactions. (See his book *Opening Up* and also the article on our website [Writing is Good Medicine](#).) Giving verbal form to emotionally powerful experiences brings understanding. A related technique is to write a letter to the person you are mad at, and then tear it up instead of sending it.

### **See Things from a Fresh Perspective**

The amount of anger you experience may be related to your thoughts, to how you see your situation. Imagine, for example, that you are waiting at a restaurant for a friend who is a half-hour late. You feel irritated. When the friend arrives, she reports that she was delayed because she was in an accident. Suddenly your emotion changes from anger to concern.

Here's what one student said about the effects of seeing things in new ways: "I've learned to think about things in alternative ways. By taming my thoughts, I find that a lot of anger has disappeared and this is a most wonderful feeling. I have now reached the stage where most of this new thinking is automatic."

### **Plan Your Response**

If you are irritated by comments like "I'm sure you would feel better if you would try this new remedy," you can prepare a response so that such comments don't bother you. In this

case, you might say something like "Thanks for your suggestion, but I'm under my doctor's care and I'm following his treatment plan" or "I'll keep that in mind."

**Accept and Acknowledge the Feeling**

Some people report that they are able to dissipate the power of anger and other feelings by naming them. The exercise produces a detachment from the feeling. As one student said, "What seems to work for me is to think about the emotion I am having. If I am angry, I will say 'Ah, that is anger'. Then I say 'I accept this anger.' Then I describe the anger. Is it a huge anger or smoldering anger or little anger? Then I notice how it feels in my body."

**Get Professional Help**

Sometimes talking with a counselor can ease the pressures created by having a long-term illness. If frustration and anger are making your relationships more stressful, you might consider getting professional help. Look for a therapist who specializes in helping people with chronic illness.

In the worksheet below, check the strategies you have used and rate their helpfulness from 0 (not at all helpful) to 10 (very helpful). Also, check those you would like to use in the future.

<b>Managing Frustration &amp; Anger</b>	<b>Tried Y/N</b>	<b>Rating (0 – 10)</b>	<b>Use in Future</b>
Pacing activity			
Pre-emptive rests			
Stress reduction practices			
Support (e.g. talking to a friend)			
Writing (journaling)			
Change perspective			
Plan response			
Acknowledge feeling			
Counseling			

## **6: Guilt**

Guilt is another frequent companion of people with CFS and FM. Sometimes people blame themselves for becoming sick. At other times, guilt is triggered by the sense of not contributing to the family or to society. If you experience guilt, what can you do to ease the burden it imposes? Here are seven strategies to consider.

### **Adjust Expectations**

Guilt is often triggered by a difference between a person's expectations and their capabilities. You can reduce guilt by adjusting your expectations downward to match your new level of functioning. As one person said, "I've lowered my standards for myself. This isn't easy, since I'm a recovering perfectionist." Another wrote that she tells herself, "If I were caring for an injured loved one, in distress, how would I take care of her? I should treat myself the same way."

### **Reframe (Change Self-Talk)**

Part of the process of adjustment is changing our internal dialogue or self-talk, so that it supports our efforts to live well with illness rather than generating guilt. One person says she has changed her self-talk about naps. In the past, when she took a nap, she told herself it was because she was lazy, but now she tells herself, "I am helping myself to be healthy. I am saving energy to spend time with my husband or to baby sit my grandchildren." Similarly, when feeling tired, you can say "This fatigue is not my fault; it came with CFS. So I don't need to feel guilty about not being able to do everything I used to." Or: "I didn't ask for FM, so why should I feel shame when it prevents me from doing things."

### **Shift Attention**

Feeling guilty is inevitable, but we can control how we respond when feelings of guilt arise. One person said that she asks herself "Is this feeling productive?" In some cases, the answer will be "Yes." Guilt can draw our attention to ways in which we have failed to live up to our standards and can motivate us to act differently. (See next strategy.)

If the feeling is not productive, however, it may be better to respond to guilt by turning our attention elsewhere. As another person wrote, "It's better not to go some places in your head, so I've learned how to control my own thoughts."

### **Apologize and Make Amends**

Guilt can be helpful if it motivates you to take better care of yourself in the future or to treat those around you with more consideration. Some people say that they have used guilt over canceling out on commitments as an impetus to be more consistent in their pacing, making themselves more dependable. One woman said that if she does something to hurt her husband or her children, like lashing out at them verbally, she apologizes.

### **Educate Others**

Some guilt may be triggered by how others treat you. In addition to adjusting your expectations for yourself, you can work on changing the expectations others have of you

as well. This involves educating the people in your life, emphasizing that CFS and FM are long-term conditions that impose significant limits and require adjustments of the person who is ill and those around her.

**Learn Assertiveness**

Another strategy for reducing guilt is to be assertive, standing up for yourself by stating what you will and won't do. One person in our program posts notes all over her house saying, "I'd love to but I just can't." The notes remind her what to say when people make requests. She says "seeing the notes so often ensures I remember to use this answer without feelings of guilt."

**Practice Relationship Triage**

A final strategy is to reevaluate your relationships, practicing what we call relationship triage: making explicit decisions about whom to include in your life, concentrating on the more valuable or necessary relationships and letting others go.

In the worksheet below, check the strategies you have used and rate their helpfulness from 0 (not at all helpful) to 10 (very helpful). Also, check those you would like to use in the future.

<b>Managing Guilt</b>	<b>Tried Y/N</b>	<b>Rating (0 – 10)</b>	<b>Use in Future</b>
Adjust expectations			
Change self-talk			
Shift attention			
Apologize and make amends			
Educate others			
Learn assertiveness			
Practice relationship triage			