



Mark Pellegrino, MD

Mentally Managing Fibromyalgia

Dr. Pellegrino shares both from his clinical practice of seeing more than 25,000 fibromyalgia (FMS) patients and his book *Fibromyalgia, Up Close and Personal* on the “mental” side of fibro. Per his book, he writes “We need to consider the mental pain as well as the physical pain; one can’t heal without the other”.

Are you saying FMS is a psychogenic disorder?

In the past, FMS was mistakenly called “psychogenic rheumatism”, which suggested that the condition was an imagined one. We know that is not the case, although people can benefit by working on the psychological mental aspects of this condition.

Could you give examples of mental stressors?

People can be stressed with any chronic illness because it affects many aspects of their lives. Financial worries (especially if you can no longer work). Feelings of worthlessness and not being able to enjoy relationships with family members because of pain and fatigue. Or anger that you have a diagnosis that will not change and you want your “before fibro” life back. It’s normal to become fearful, frightened, frustrated and anxious when dealing with chronic pain.

What do you suggest?

Work with a mental health professional to help manage your FMS. Recognize that pain affects all of you, including your mental outlook. Studies conclude that stress, anxiety and depression do NOT cause FMS and that you have no more psychological problems than anyone else dealing with a chronic illness. So it is okay to get help if you need it.

What are some therapy options?

It might be one-on-one, group therapy, counseling, a social worker or other qualified individuals who help you cope with everyday activities. They can assist you in making the necessary lifestyle adjustments to go from “I can’t because I have FMS” to “I can despite my FMS”.

Are there other mental challenges?

Sure. Poor concentration and “fibro-fog”. The mind can have a powerful healing effect on the body, so we need to keep our minds healthy and use them to help the healing process. Hope is the most important tool in the loaded mental toolbox. I am an optimist and believe that everyone can find a place of balance in detaching yourself from your fibro and integrating it into your everyday lives. The ultimate prize in mental coping is acceptance of fibromyalgia.

What about anxiety & panic attacks?

Chronic anxiety symptoms or panic attacks can be present with fibro due to the dysfunctional autonomic nerves. Symptoms can include rapid heart beat, chest pain, lightheadedness, difficulty breathing or swallowing and trouble relaxing or falling asleep. Learning how to help yourself relax is part of the mental challenge.

Can stress affect FMS?

Stress is a major factor and can aggravate FMS. Mental strategies can reduce the effect of stress on our bodies. Each of us has a mental image of “who” we are that may have to change with a fibro diagnosis and our new lifestyle I call it the “Five REpairs”. 1) REcognize & REdefine; 2) REalistic REtraining; 3) RELiable RELationships; 4) RELax & REfresh; and 5) RESpect & RESponsibility. Each address a different aspect of a mental approach to fibro and the ultimate goal is to integrate all five into a strategy that works for you (explained in detail in my book).

What are strategies of how to RELax?

Probably the most difficult thing for people with fibro to do is to relax! We have a hypersensitive autonomic nervous system, especially the sympathetic “flight or fight” response that seems to make our bodies and our minds feel always tense. The relaxation response does the opposite: calms down the mind, loosens tight muscles, improves blood flow and normalizes the heart rate. So choose to relax! Find a quiet, comfortable spot, do several deep breaths (inhale to a count of 3, exhale to a count of 6), listen to soft music; think happy thoughts, anything pleasant to you.

©Mark Pellegrino MD & TyH Publications (M. Squires). Adapted from the book *Fibromyalgia, Up Close and Personal* by Dr. Pellegrino; available from TyH.

For informational purposes only; not intended to treat, cure, diagnose or prevent any disease, nor substitute for professional medical advice.

Read more articles by Dr. Pellegrino at www.e-tyh.com