

# Talking About Chronic Fatigue

We will consider what CFS is, how we understand it medically and biblically, and how we might offer help.

We want to consider how a christian living with a debilitating illness like chronic fatigue syndrome can find purpose and meaning.

## WHAT IS CFS?

4 components:

1. Debilitating fatigue that is worsened by activity
2. Post-exertional malaise,
3. Unrefreshing sleep or sleep disturbance
4. Cognitive difficulties ('brain fog')

People with all 4 symptoms that have lasted 3 months or more can be diagnosed with this syndrome, so long as other conditions have been excluded. ([nice.org.uk](http://nice.org.uk) -2021 updated guideline)

Associated symptoms

Consider the impact of the illness on behaviour, relationships, thoughts, feelings and the heart.

## STATISTICS

- Adult prevalence of CFS 0.65% - 0.9%. (75% female)
  - Peak incidence ages 40–49.
  - Symptom severity varies both between patients and over time.
  - 82% - 95% of people experience life-long symptoms and increased health care needs.
- (*"Beyond Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome"; IOM report 2015*)

This experience touches on the experience of many chronic illnesses - eg. chronic migraine, autoimmune diseases, Lyme disease...

## CAUSES

There is no objective test for CFS/ME and consistent scientific explanations remain elusive.

Observational studies reveal higher levels of depression and anxiety in CFS

Consider other diagnoses:

- Physical - fibromyalgia, thyroid disorder, MS, arthritis, cancer, med side effects, poor sleep, ageing, parenting young children
- Life stresses - grief, overwork, broken relationships, traumatic events

## MEDICAL TREATMENT GUIDELINES

People should remain in their "energy envelope" when undertaking activity of any kind, and a physical activity programme should only be considered in specific circumstances.

CBT only helpful in treating anxiety around the condition, not the illness itself.

Be aware of the principles of energy management which include:

- learning to use the amount of energy you have while reducing the risk of post-exertional malaise or worsening symptoms by exceeding your limits

- recognising that each person has a different and fluctuating energy limit and they are experts in judging their own limits

([nice.org.uk](http://nice.org.uk) -2021 updated guideline)

## CAPTURING THE EXPERIENCE BIBLICALLY

Psalm 23	A shadow of death
Psalm 46	A time of trouble
Isaiah 42:3	A bruised reed, dimly burning wick
2 Cor 4	Knowing your body is a 'jar of clay'
2 Cor 12	A thorn in my flesh
James 1	A kind of trial

What thoughts and emotions might your counsellee be experiencing?

What might this illness reveal about their beliefs and desires?

## BIBLICAL THEMES:

Disappointment, hopelessness, weakness, who is God, shame, uncertainty

Where in Scripture might we find these themes?

'Scripture can give us the words to enable sufferers to experience abundant life because of this illness, not in spite of it.'

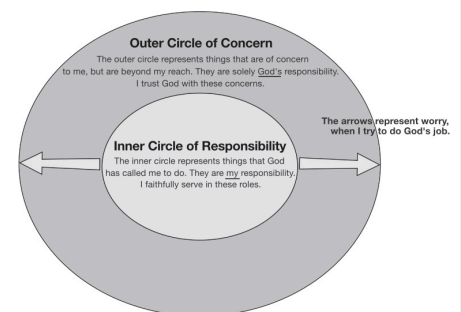
('I'm Exhausted' What to do when you're always tired: D Powlison. CCEF. New Growth Press 2010)

## SPEAK

How can we give the counsellee hopeful words to know God and live fruitfully despite their weariness?

Questions to consider:

- How can you make good choices? How can you love others and not sin while feeling like a dimly burning wick?
- How do you live well within your 'energy envelope'? Remember circles of responsibility
- How can you help your loved ones who will be suffering too?



Adapted from Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands by Paul David Tripp.

Hebrews 5:8 - 'Even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered.' (NLT)