

## "What I have learned from counselling people with CFS/ME"

By Gill Jones, Online Counsellor

This article is written from my personal experience of counselling people with ME/CFS - it is not a scholarly article and there are no lists of suggested further reading. I am trying to show here how some people make recovery from ME/CFS more difficult and suggest alternatives which (based on my limited experience) assist recovery. As an online counsellor I work with people with ME/CFS using email or live chat. One of the first things I notice are the ways clients put themselves under pressure.

These pressures might include increasing their physical level of activity faster than their bodies dictate or going into work (when they needed to rest) to avoid taking more time off sick (sometimes because they haven't told anyone at work about their CFS/ME) or to tell me they need to deal with several different problems at once. It is also noticeable that many clients want to turn the clock back and become the person they were before the onset of CFS/ME. Inbuilt perfectionism means most clients write me long emails and blame themselves for feeling exhausted.

I help them to recognise these pressures and encourage them not to hold unrealistic expectations. Their powerless feelings are further heightened by all the different treatments/diets/regimes they try - which don't work or bring only temporary relief. Underneath is the worry that as nothing seems to work, how can they ever recover?

People work in different ways during our counselling contact (the choice is theirs). Some complete forms, diaries or charts and notice changes which help them to recognise and accept their progress. Others write about what is concerning them. They write about deeply-held feelings and fears which they can't express to their families in case they damage already fragile relationships. I read and respond to these previously unspoken thoughts and feelings and help them to feel understood.

It is noticeable that those who respond best to online counselling can focus on one thing at a time. In many cases they also feel well supported, both by me and by the people around them.

I thought I could best sum up what I see as useful self-help with the following list:

### **STOP**

Blaming yourself for having CFS/ME or for not recovering from it - it's an illness and everyone's recovery is different.

Looking backwards to the person you were before ME - you won't be the person you were before, you will be someone who's recovered from CFS/ME.

### **START**

Accepting yourself as someone with CFS/ME even if those around you don't (try educating them by leaving relevant magazine articles and books lying around).

Believing you are in charge of your recovery (and don't give up if you have a relapse or set back).

### **FOCUS**

On one thing at a time and one day at a time.

On small, achievable physical and emotional steps, not giant leaps.

### **CHANNEL**

Your guilty/self-blaming thoughts - challenge them.

Some energy to record daily the positive thoughts and moments in your life.

I hope these ideas are useful.  
Gill Jones, MA, MBACP (Snr Accred)