Lifestyle Changes for Better Living With Fibromyalgia

by STARLA RICH

Tips for Living With Fibromyalgia

Starla and Adriel offer their tips and advice on living with fibromyalgia.

Change is something that is inevitable throughout life. Sometimes it is by choice, other times it is of necessity, and it is always challenging no matter the circumstance.

As a long-term sufferer of fibromyalgia, I've learned the importance of making lifestyle changes to better adjust to the health-imposed changes forced on me by this frustrating condition.

While life is not what we perceive as normal, finding a new "normal" can bring the joy back with time and effort. People often look at those dealing with fibromyalgia and think we look healthy, and that life is normal for us. I suppose that is because we have achieved the art of becoming great pretenders. We tend to fake it 'til we make it, which can be exhausting.

However, there is a better option for us to take our lives back through simple steps of altering our lifestyle to make it more comfortable, manageable and enjoyable.

The Standard To-Do List for Fibromyalgia Sufferers

If you have been an FM sufferer for any length of time and have read even one article on how to better cope with fibromyalgia then you know there is a standard list of do's and don'ts.

Before we discuss some of the more personal lifestyle changes, let's recap the givens:

- **Job changes.** Explore the many options available. Did you know that you are covered under the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), which means you're entitled to reasonable accommodation from your employer? If your symptoms are too severe, you may qualify for Social Security Disability or Supplemental Security Income (for those with a shorter work history). Also, talk to your employer about whether long-term disability insurance covers you and look into other disability benefits programs.
- **Diet.** This lifestyle change is more important than you can imagine. Those dealing with the chronic pain and fatigue that comes with fibromyalgia soon realize that certain foods serve as triggers. Caffeine, sugar, gluten, processed foods all serve as triggers for inflammation, bloating and more.
- **Exercise.** Even though debilitating fatigue and pain get worse with exertion, it is still imperative to implement some level of exercise into your life. The key is to be consistent about it and not overexert yourself. Over time, you may be able to increase the amount you're able to do.
- **Sleep.** Those of us suffering know that whether you sleep 16 hours in a day or six, you still wake un-refreshed. Talk to your doctor and explore options to improve sleep and beat fibromyalgia insomnia.
- **Manage stress.** Stress is the silent killer. Take some time to determine what your stress triggers are and take steps to manage those areas of life better.

- **Find support.** You may feel alone in the process sometimes as you try to cope with fibromyalgia, but there are others who truly understand. Seek out family, friends, and support groups.

Common Sense Solutions For A Better Lifestyle

Make Family Your First Priority

Simply put, if you don't take care of yourself, then you will not be able to care for your family. If your family ends up being neglected because your actions leave you incapacitated, then something needs to change.

By consciously putting your family first, thinking of how your health challenges and coping techniques affect them, will help you better embrace suggested lifestyle changes.

Just Say No

Stop volunteering for everything and stop seeing yourself as the only one who can successfully complete all those important projects. Besides, those tasks probably aren't as essential as they first appeared to be.

Saying "no" may be difficult at first, and some people will be offended that you've stopped volunteering. But your real friends will continue their support and love even when you say no.

Get Ready For the Day

Pajamas are so comfy, aren't they? But they are equated with sleep or sickness and staying in bed. So do your best not to "look sick" every single day. Take a shower and get dressed. Maybe even fix your hair.

Tell yourself you won't let fibromyalgia rob you of your dignity. Dress in a manner in which you would be comfortable going out in public. Even if you stay at home all day, without seeing anyone other than your family, you can improve your mental wellbeing by showing your chronic illness you aren't sick enough to stay in pajamas.

Stop Being a Perfectionist

I have a confession: this one has been the most challenging for me. I find comfort in an organized, clean and spotless environment. However, the lack of energy and physical stamina prevent me from creating this "perfect" environment. I am learning to be happy with wiping down the bathroom counter instead of cleaning the entire room.

Remember that just because your body is behaving imperfectly doesn't mean the rest of your life has to make up for it. Be kind and gentle, loving and forgiving of yourself. Embrace the moment with more joy and less stress realizing what truly matters and what doesn't.

Be Honest With Others

Tell people if you're having a hard day. I know it's hard to do — I tried to hide it for many years. FM sufferers love acting like we've got it all together. But to truly improve our lifestyle, honesty is necessary.

Explain to those closest why you need to take it easy. Explain to your kids you need them to bring the groceries into the house because lifting the bags is too difficult. Ask a bagging clerk to help you to your car with your groceries even though they don't think you look like you need it. Tell them why.

My final word of encouragement is this: don't let suffering from fibromyalgia define you as a person. It is not who you are but what you have. You can live in spite of it and enjoy life with a few lifestyle changes.

Keep discovering more about yourself and what makes your life better. Don't give up!

Next page: Read Adriel's tips for living with fibromyalgia from how to pace yourself to taking steps for improving your mental health.

Living With Fibromyalgia: Learning to Accept Life with Fibromyalgia

When you live with a chronic illness like fibromyalgia, it is inevitable that certain things will change. Change may not always be easy, especially when it feels like it is being forced upon you.

I do not always handle change well, and for several years I had a difficult time accepting the changes fibromyalgia brought to my life.

But I can say that once you begin to look at these changes as a positive thing, if you look at them as a way to enjoy your best life possible, it does become easier to bare.

Simply put, when you have fibromyalgia, you will not be able to do things that most people can do. An important step in learning to live with fibromyalgia is accepting that we have to be more conservative of our energy.

Listen to Your Body

One of the most important tips I can give is to learn to listen to your own body.

No one knows what you are experiencing better than you do, no one knows what you are capable of better than you do, and no one knows when you need to stop and rest better than you do.

This may not always be easy. For years I had repressed and ignored my pain, fatigue, and other symptoms. I was in denial, and I kept hoping it would just go away. Clearly, that didn’t work. It just led to me getting worse to the point I could not ignore it anymore.

Once I got to that point, it was difficult to then transition to listening to my body and understanding what it needed. But the more I try to do this, the easier it becomes to manage and live with fibromyalgia.

Pace Yourself

Learning to pace yourself can be a genuine challenge. But it is necessary to manage life with fibromyalgia.

Set small, reasonable goals for yourself. Some days you may be able to do a little more, other days you may be able to do a little less, and that is okay.

Pacing yourself means you have to plan for periods of rest, even on good days. It can be tempting to try to get a lot done on your occasional good days. But even if you are feeling okay right now, this does not mean you will not feel the payback from it later.

It is important that you learn your limitations and when your body has had enough and needed rest.

Get Moving

I know you are probably tired of hearing you need to exercise.

You may feel like exercise is impossible, that you’re just in too much pain. I have been there too. But low impact exercise a few times a week has helped me improve my quality of life. To get to that point though, I had to readjust what I viewed as exercise.

Once upon a time, walking was a low impact exercise for me. However, every time I would go for what I considered a short walk I would be in pain for days afterward, to the point that I wouldn’t go for another walk for a

week or more. I told my doctor this, and she responded that maybe walking wasn't low impact enough for me. This opened a whole new line of thought for me.

I have found there are times I can walk, swim, do an hour of pilates, and then there are times when that is not right for me. I have found that it is more important to get moving and have some form of activity, no matter how little, then to push myself too hard and trigger a flare-up.

If you are have not done any form of exercise in a while, you must start small and slow. Consider starting with stretching exercises. Do a few minutes at a time at first and work your way up from there.

Remember, what is right for someone else may not be right for you. What was right for you last month may not be right for you now. What is right for you now, may not be what is right for you a month from now.

Establish a Healthy Sleep Cycle

Sleep is vital to managing fibromyalgia. However, getting the sleep you need when you have fibromyalgia is very difficult. Not only do many of us have insomnia, but fibromyalgia also causes sleep disturbances. This means that even when we are asleep, we do not get good quality sleep.

Having a healthy sleep cycle is the best way to combat these issues and can help to improve fibromyalgia symptoms. It is much easier said than done though.

I can tell you from experience that making yourself go to bed and get up at the same time each day can make a big difference in your sleep health.

Also cutting back on caffeine, having a cut off time for caffeine, and cutting back on daytime napping have all been helpful for me to establish a healthy sleep cycle.

Take Steps to Improve Your Mental Health

Mental health is closely related to fibromyalgia. It is not uncommon to find that a person with fibromyalgia also has depression, anxiety, or some other mental illness. It is also well documented that stress leads to fibromyalgia flare-ups.

Living with a mental health condition, as well as fibromyalgia, can bring its own unique set of challenges. It is important to remember your mental health is just as important as your physical health.

Looking for balance in caring for both conditions may be difficult at times, but in the long run doing so will make living with fibromyalgia easier.

Here are some tips for taking care of both your physical and mental health:

- Practice self-care – Taking your medicine and supplements; drinking water; eating a balanced diet; getting dressed in the morning; taking relaxing baths; talking to a friend; and spending time alone are all possible examples of self-care.
- Learn to let go of guilt.
- Stop comparing yourself to others, or even to your past self.
- Learn acceptance - accept your present circumstances; your illness; and what you can do at this given moment.
- Find relaxation and coping techniques that work for you - this could be reading; writing; art or other creative projects; spending time in nature; or talking to a friend or someone else with a chronic illness.
- Learn to ask for help when you need it.

Find Your Support System

Everyone needs to have a support system, but when you have fibromyalgia, it becomes even more important.

Support comes in many forms and can come from many different sources. Here are some places you may look to for support:

- Family
- Friends
- Co-workers or schoolmates
- Support groups
- Religious groups
- Social Media and online communities
- Doctors and others in the medical field

It may also help to identify what kind of support you need. For example:

- Do you need practical help with your health or with day to day activities?
- Are you looking for advice?
- Do you want emotional support or a listening ear?

Pinpointing what you need at any given moment may help you know who to turn to at that time.

Living with fibromyalgia may not be easy, but many things can make living with this illness a little more comfortable. Learning to listen to your body and giving it what it needs, when it needs it, will set you in the right direction on the path that is living with fibromyalgia.