

“Healing is a matter of time, but it is also sometimes a matter of opportunity.”

—HIPPOCRATES —

CFS/ME is one of those illnesses for which receiving a diagnosis can bring as much frustration as relief. All too often a person who has spent years searching for a diagnosis expects that identification of the illness will bring with it, if not a cure, at the very least an effective treatment plan. Unfortunately, most of us who have received the diagnosis have also been told that CFS/ME has “no known cause or cure,” a phrase that invariably creates enough hopelessness to offset any relief the diagnosis may have offered.

The lack of known cause or cure, while discouraging, certainly does not imply that an illness cannot be treated, or that those who suffer from it will not recover. Throughout the ages, physicians have successfully treated diseases on the basis of their knowledge of symptoms and human physiological responses rather than on test results. And because human physiology has not changed much over the past 40,000 years, treatment approaches, for the most part, have remained remarkably consistent. For example, the Chinese medical system, which relies heavily on nutrition and the use of herbs, was codified more than 5,000 years ago. Herbal remedies, their pharmaceutical derivatives, massage and manual manipulation techniques, nutritional therapy, and stress reduction methods (meditation, yoga) are treatments that have withstood the test of time, and still form the mainstay of medical systems throughout the world.

The premise of this book is that the absence of a cure does not in any way imply that there is no treatment for CFS/ME. To make the grounds for this position clear, consider the popular concept that an illness “attacks.” Cure, in this conceptual framework, consists of killing the attacker. In CFS/ME, the attacker is unknown, unidentified, and perhaps not even a single factor; thus counterattack is impossible. The victim is left with only two choices: lie back and let nature take its course (which in CFS/ME can be agonizing), or seek alternative points of view. The alternative we suggest is to view CFS/ME as a form of systemic damage that must be gradually, methodically, and thoughtfully repaired. Or, to use an analogy, if CFS/ME is like falling into a hole, as some patients have observed, recovery is like climbing out of the hole, step by step, rung by rung.

The purpose of treatment is to provide rungs. Each treatment that relieves a symptom can serve to haul a person with CFS/ME one step farther out of the hole. And with every treatment that successfully accomplishes its purpose, the body becomes stronger and more footholds are available. People who have had CFS/ME for a long time are well aware that this approach can lead to significant improvement, enough so that return to work or recommencement of a social life is possible. Statements like: “With B12 shots I had enough stamina to go on vacation with my family” are heard frequently enough to warrant attention. If each person measures a treatment by what it can restore to his or her life, that standard provides a basis and framework for recovery.

With that analogy in mind, we have compiled a list of treatments, therapies, and techniques that have been successfully used by people with CFS/ME. Inclusion on this list does not constitute an endorsement. None of these treatments is guaranteed. Realistically speaking, what works wonders for one person may not work at all for another. Nor are they cures. None has been shown to completely

eradicate the disease. But many of these treatments may relieve the worst symptoms or decrease the severity of the illness. For people who are unable to leave their beds, have lost their jobs, or would like to resume the semblance of a normal life, a 10%, 20%, or 30% improvement is not to be lightly dismissed. The key to determining which of these treatments will be effective is knowledge.

Understanding your illness— your symptoms, your responses, your ups and downs—is the greatest favor you can do for yourself and your doctor. Dr. Patricia Salvato, a CFS/ME specialist practicing in Houston, Texas, expresses this idea quite well: "Well-informed patients simply make for better partners in health-care, and, when knowledge is shared, everybody benefits; there is an unbelievable amount of healing in just the sharing of new knowledge"