

Understanding CFS/ME: The Biopsychosocial Model

'**Biopsychosocial**' is a term we use to understand the various factors that affect people with CFS/ME. As you will have experienced, your CFS/ME causes many different symptoms and influences many different parts of your life.

For example, when you have CFS/ME you are:

- physically unwell and have several **biological** symptoms – fatigue and pain
- you may feel less like your normal self and more unhappy – **psychological**
- you may not feel able to see friends/people as much – **social**

Whatever is happening to your body physically (e.g. fatigue, pain, dizziness) is also having a knock-on effect *psychologically* (changes in the way you feel and behave) and *socially* (changes in activity, working life, seeing friends). It is important to understand how CFS/ME affects these aspects of your life (not just the physical symptoms) in order to help you improve the quality of your life.

An example of CFS/ME:

A hard working 30 year old woman is doing well, working hard, exercising and socialising'. She gets a viral infection around the time she is promoted and feels under pressure to take only one day off before returning to work. She is working hard and more so because she is not 100% healthy. She is able to 'push on' by stopping her regular exercise and social outings so she can rest and sleep more when not at work. She starts losing health and fitness and becomes physically more vulnerable, feels miserable and her work is even harder...

1. Precipitating (triggering) factors

There are many possible precipitating factors that may 'set off' CFS/ME, such as a viral illness or accident, an accumulation of stress, a sudden unexpected loss or accident. It is unlikely there will be just one trigger to your CFS/ME. Many triggers may come together at the same time, overloading the body physically and mentally. These triggers may have accumulated over time or be sudden and overwhelming

What factors may have triggered your CFS?

PHYSICAL

PSYCHOLOGICAL

SOCIAL

2. Perpetuating (maintaining) factors

Those factors that caused CFS/ME at the beginning are not always the same as those that are causing your symptoms to continue. Being aware of things that make your symptoms worse right now is very important. This may include 'overdoing' it, arguments, poor sleep, low mood, cold weather, other health conditions etc.

Of course, there may also be things that you find help your symptoms, such as managing to get a good nights sleep, eating well, yoga etc.

What maintains your CFS/ME or makes your symptoms worse?

PHYSICAL

PSYCHOLOGICAL

SOCIAL

3. Predisposing (pre-existing) factors

Finally, sometimes we can recognise pre-existing problems that affect CFS/ME and may have increased your risk of developing CFS/ME. This may include a lifestyle that allowed you very little time to rest or relax, a biological vulnerability to illness, difficulty saying 'no' to requests, extremely high expectations or 'perfectionist' or a long-standing tendency to feeling tired or stressed.

Predisposing factors do not *cause* your CFS/ME but may make it more likely that CFS/ME will be triggered off. Of course, not all predisposing factors affect everyone, but it is worth looking at them in case they do add something to your current problems.

PHYSICAL

PSYCHOLOGICAL

SOCIAL
