



## A Case For Exercise

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Do you find it a struggle to motivate yourself to get up and get going? The fatigue, pain, foggy brain and depression caused by Auto Immune (AI) disease can make life unbearable at times. The symptoms that keep you away from the gym are the exact reasons you need to visit the gym. For people with AI movement is the key to health and wellness. Diet plays a big part of course, but if you are like me and living with an AI, it is the movement that is difficult to accomplish, not the eating. I know, because I have been suffering for most of my life. This is my story and how exercise has impacted my life in a very positive way.

It all began at age 23 when I entered the workforce full steam. Though I had suffered aches and pains, headaches and nausea as a child, I was able to do everything I needed and wanted to do. At age 23 I was diagnosed with Fibrositis; now referred to as Fibromyalgia. Fibromyalgia is a common syndrome in which people experience long-term, body-wide pain and tender points in joints, muscles, tendons, and other soft tissues. Fibromyalgia has also been linked to fatigue, sleep problems, headaches, depression, and anxiety. I had difficulty working long hours, experienced severe back pain and would need bed rest after only four hours of work. After receiving the diagnosis, my doctor instructed me to exercise as that was the only way I could prevent myself from getting worse. He also reported that it was a lifelong chronic illness and that if I did not exercise I would most likely end up using a walker or a wheel chair.

Wow, that was a lot to take in at such a young age. What did I do? I went out and joined a near- by gym. I paid up front for an entire year's membership. My trainer showed me how to use the equipment and set me up a plan to help me build muscular endurance and strength. I began taking the aerobic (group fitness) classes to increase my stamina. I worked my plan even though I was tired and in pain. After two and a half months I felt so much better. I was no longer in pain, was sleeping through the night and was able to work 12 – 16 hour days> I felt good and looked strong.

Over the years I would have flare ups and new symptoms. My body would stiffen up after inactivity and rest. I have the Frankenstein walk in the morning and have difficulty going up the stairs. After sitting as little as five minutes or so my pelvis stiffens up and I have to 'help' myself out of the chair. I spent years trying to find out what was wrong with me. I was fit, strong, thin and lean, yet I was in so much pain. I was reluctant to take long term medications because I did not want to risk long term effects. I noticed however, that when I was exercising regularly the symptoms were tolerable and I was able to get by with exercise, good nutrition and my good old friend Mr. Coffee. When I went for periods of time, 2 weeks to a month, without 'working out' my symptoms would get worse. Even though I still ate well and took anti inflammatory medications as needed I was experiencing such pain and immobility that I felt unmotivated to take care of things I needed to accomplish on a daily basis. Life was just too hard to handle. Once I pushed myself to get back to exercise, I would find my body willing and able to proceed. I actually became a fitness instructor because it required me to go to the gym and put forth effort necessary to keep myself in shape. I had a job to do and people were counting on me to be there. I also received an added blessing; I met people like me, suffering from AI, recovering from injuries or simply those who were overweight and de-conditioned. These folks were hoping for a positive change. They were committed to discovering a way to improve their quality of life, by improving their health and wellness. My passion for fitness training blossomed and I have spent the last 25 years educating myself on how best to serve them.

During my career as a fitness instructor, I have worked with folks like me who in spite of their illnesses, injuries and weight issues persevered and subsequently were rewarded with a better quality of life. Unfortunately, I also encountered those who gave up too quickly, those whom allowed their fatigue and pain to take control and prevent them from reaping the rewards of physical exercise. I am sad for them. I understand that when one feels too tired and too sore to get up off the couch or out of bed, or maybe even has only enough motivation to go to work and take care of their family, they have little energy for much else, especially something that requires energy. The desire to rest wins out over the desire to move. But that is exactly what we must do, in order to improve and maintain our quality of life, we must move.

I am now approaching age 50 and my disease progresses. Along with the fibrositis I have been diagnosed with Asthma, Insulin Resistance, Mixed Connective Tissue Disease and Ankylosing Spondylitis; All chronic; none terminal. I have had to discontinue certain exercises due to increased risk of injury or because they cause too much pain. I have also had to discontinue teaching some formats of group fitness classes for the same reasons. My goal now is too keep working out without compromising my physical ability, yet protect and maintain that which keeps me strong. I have begun to use long term meds because the pain has reached a level I can no longer tolerate without them. Doctors have related to me that my years of exercise and good nutrition have made a HUGE difference. I have been able to hold off on medications because I worked so hard to take care of myself. Believe me it was not easy. My heart and lungs are very strong, I have exceptional bone density and I am flexible, strong and have incredible balance. The most challenging part of having AI is that I look so healthy and strong on the outside that it is hard for people to believe I am sick on the inside. So no complaining as it is difficult to convey to others how poorly I feel. So I hang tough, because I have to. I exercise because I need to.

So when you see me in class I want you to know that it is hard for me too. I am committed to make it to the gym. These days I have to modify movements, use lighter weights and decrease my intensity, but I do not mind. Because if I were to stop moving now ..... .... I would stop moving altogether.

See you in class!

Sincerely,

Vickie J.

