

Supporting those with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Although the name implies people with Chronic Fatigue and Immune Dysfunction Syndrome (CFIDS) are simply tired, they are suffering from a devastating illness that brings myriad symptoms. CFIDS is a complex and debilitating chronic illness that affects the brain and multiple body systems.

CFIDS is like having a flu that never goes away—headaches, fevers, sore throats, muscle and joint pain, difficulty with memory and concentration, and a level of fatigue described as profound exhaustion, especially following mental or physical exertion. For many that means a trip to the store can lead to days in bed, too sick to function. There is no cure for CFIDS—it is a chronic, long-term illness.

The physical toll of CFIDS is immense, but the emotional effects can be even more challenging. There is a great sense of isolation and loneliness when spending days, months or years confined to bed or house. Relationships fall away as friends doubt the severity of invisible symptoms or tire of canceled plans. Because people with CFIDS have limited energy, numerous choices must be made every day on how to spend it. There is constant loss ... choosing one thing inevitably means losing many others. The grieving for daily losses and the loss of future dreams seems endless. Becoming severely and chronically ill also strips away self-identity. People with CFIDS struggle with finding a new sense of purpose and worth when what they can do changes drastically.

Ways congregation members can be supportive”

- Understand that CFIDS is a real, physical illness. Telling people to stay positive or to get more rest is not the cure. It is not a psychiatric illness or caused by depression or spiritual weakness.
- A person with CFIDS has limited energy. Often the choice to attend worship means giving up everything else for that weekend, then paying for it by spending days in bed. Understand without judging that making that choice every Sunday may not be possible. Celebrate when people with CFIDS are able to be there, knowing that even though they may look “great” they have sacrificed to be there and most likely aren’t feeling great.
- CFIDS lasts forever. Sometimes this means keeping a member on the prayer list for many years, coordinating weekly meals, or sending cheerful notes regularly.
- Because of the isolation, congregation members can be a huge support just by offering quick visits. Bringing a cup of coffee one afternoon or stopping by with a hug can make all the difference.
- The limitations of CFIDS make it difficult for sufferers to perform daily tasks. Organize volunteers for picking up medications, driving children to lessons, or cleaning the house.
- Make physical accommodations to help people with CFIDS attend church functions more easily: offer parking spots close to the building, encourage them to sit throughout services, provide seating in areas like the narthex for visiting, allow them to go through buffet lines or to Communion first so they don’t have to stand for long periods.
- Pastors can facilitate an atmosphere of finding identity through Christ, rather than the world’s view of value based on what we do, or things we have.
- You can learn more at the CFIDS Association of America Web site at www.cfids.org

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