



Managing Chronic Fatigue:

*Balancing energy
drainers with energy
givers to help you live
within your energy
envelope*

The information within this e-booklet is for information purposes only. It has been written by a chronic illness patient who has no medical training. It should not be used to diagnose or treat any illness. All health decisions should be made in conjunction with advice from a qualified healthcare practitioner.

My experience with chronic fatigue

Fatigue is my most prominent and challenging symptom. It started in 2011. Alongside other symptoms such as pain, I began to feel a bit tired and not quite myself. This progressively became worse but no-one seemed to be able to tell me why. Long-story short, I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia in August 2013 and I thought that was the answer I had been looking for.

Unfortunately for me, things did not improve upon receiving a fibromyalgia diagnosis. In fact, my fatigue became steadily worse. I felt like my life was falling apart around me. I could no longer go out and socialise with friends, housework became impossible and my life revolved around work and little else.

I would wake up feeling terrible, drag myself to work, somehow get through the day and then come home and collapse in a heap on the sofa. My weekends were spent in bed or on the sofa trying my best to recoup some energy so that I could do it all again the following week.

I was in an energy crisis. And I did what anyone would do in my situation; I visited my doctor several times. Yet, I never really received any helpful advice. I was told to eat better and exercise more. In my job as a guide dog trainer, I was walking for miles upon miles each day. Yet I had to exercise more?!

With hindsight, what I needed was to realise that I was pushing myself far too much and I was really sick. Lyme disease had entered my life at this point but I was completely unaware. I buried my head in the sand and told myself that if I just kept going everything would be okay. Except it wasn't. By the summer of 2014, I completely and utterly crashed.

I've never been the same since.

Through trial and error and lots of my own research, I've come to understand chronic fatigue better. Over the years, I have developed strategies that help me to manage my fatigue. Today, I want to share one of those with you. But first, I want to talk about something really important.

Living within your energy envelope

Chronic fatigue is a symptom that we all share but the extent to which it affects us will vary between each individual. It's therefore important to realise that there is no one fix or solution. Even what I am going to share with you today will need to be adapted to suit your individual needs. It's important to be self-aware and to know your own body.

Each of us will have limitations that are unique to us. As an example, one person

with chronic fatigue might not have any problem spending a couple of hours reading a book. Another may find reading incredibly difficult and energy draining. What we need to do is identify our limitations and figure out what we can do and achieve in a day without suffering from payback (which I'll talk about in a little while).

I refer to this as our energy envelope. It's our safe zone; the things we can do in a day without it having a detrimental effect on our health.

Your energy envelope may be completely different to mine. And, it will change over time as you progress through your recovery. Right at the very start, back in 2014 when I was bedbound, simply being awake and functioning was pushing me out with my energy envelope. At that point, I needed to focus on getting quality rest and supporting the energy mechanisms of my body. Anything more was too much for me.

Now that I have built myself up and I'm further into my recovery, I am able to do more. It's been a long road to get here and I still have a long way to go. But, staying within my energy envelope (as it has changed and evolved over the years) has played a key role in my progress.

How I view energy: “Balancing the books”

There are many different theories out there that help to explain life with chronic fatigue. The most famous is the ‘Spoon Theory’. As great as the ‘Spoon Theory is’, I don't relate to quantifying energy in terms of spoons. Instead, I prefer to think of energy in terms of money and accounting.

I should mention here that I absolutely rubbish at maths; ask me to do any sum and my brain will betray me and decide it can't possible add 57 to 28. So don't worry, you don't need to be an accounting whizz here.

What I'm talking about is thinking about energy in terms of balancing the books. It's like keeping a budget. In real life terms, you have an income (it may not actually be you who has the income and I completely understand that) and you have outgoings. Everyone's aim is to get to the end of the month without getting into debt. Which isn't always easy (and the same applies to energy but we'll get to that).

When thinking about energy, we want to try and aim to get through each day without going into debt. If we head into the red, payback results.

Let's talk about payback

Payback is a bitch. There, I said it. I know we're all thinking it. Why on earth should we have to suffer for washing the frickin' dishes (or insert any mundane everyday task that you struggle with). I don't even wash dishes, I have a dishwasher to do

that. But, emptying or loading the damn thing totally does me in... but I digress.

The more technical or medically correct term for payback is post-exertion malaise (PEM). It's an increase in symptoms caused by over-doing it. In other words, we do too much, go into the red (or debt if you rather) and feel like we want to curl up and hibernate until we feel better.

For me, PEM feels like I've been hit by a truck while subsequently suffering from the flu. It's my everyday symptoms greatly intensified. I become incredibly fatigued, my muscles ache, my head feels full and foggy, my limbs feel like they weigh a ton, I feel so ill and flu-like. It's horrible.

How long it takes to recover from PEM is individual. It depends on a few different factors: how sick we are to begin with, how much we push ourselves and what we do to recover.

I could write a whole guide and dedicate it solely to PEM but for now, we're going to try and do our best to avoid that hell.

Introducing energy builders and energy drainers

One strategy I use to help me balance my books and avoid PEM is to think about my day in terms of energy drainers and energy builders. As the names would suggest, the former are tasks that expend energy and the latter are what help me to recoup some energy (or at the very least they are energy neutral and help to stop me from crashing).

My goal each day is to try to balance my energy drainers with energy builders. It's a strategy I use to help me to stay within my energy envelope and avoid PEM. It's by no means an exact science and it doesn't always work (life likes to get in the way sometimes!). But, generally, I find it helpful so I thought I would share it with you.

I use an activity tracker in my bullet journal to help me balance my books and I will share how to do this with you shortly. First, we need to identify our energy drainers and energy builders.

P.S. If you have no idea what a bullet journal is, check out my blog post about it [here](#).

Identifying your energy drainers and energy builders

On page 8, you will find a worksheet to help you list your energy drainers and energy builders. It's important to identify them as the idea is we are going to track them in an activity tracker as a way to help us balance our "energy books". Before we get started, here's some helpful information.

Energy drainers

When I first set out to do this, I found identifying my energy drainers incredibly easy. Heck, I felt like I could list every single thing I did in a day. After all, everything sucked the energy out of me! As I've refined my strategy, I've learned to focus more on specific tasks. If I listed absolutely everything, it would make things far too complicated and I wouldn't stick with filling out my activity tracker each day (I promise we'll get to this soon).

When thinking about my energy drainers, I list them in categories. These are:

1. **Physical:** any activity that expends physical energy.
2. **Mental:** tasks that require concentration and I find tiring.
3. **Social:** basically any social activity, which can include online forums and social media too.

Sometimes activities can cross-over but I think about the primary category (i.e. the one that's most obvious) and list it there. My biggest tip: try to think of 5 things per category as a starting point. Go with things that you do regularly (and need to do) that cost you the most in terms of your energy budget.

Energy builders

At first, I was at a complete loss as to what my energy builders were! Maybe you are feeling the same way? Sometimes it can be incredibly difficult to think of the things that help us to build and recoup some energy. You might even be reading this thinking, "*I don't have any energy builders*". They are there though, trust me.

I think the best way to think about them is in terms of self-care. What do you do to help yourself feel better? Sometimes the answer is **literally nothing**. Lying in a dark room and completely switching off used to be the only thing I could do to help prevent a crash.

If you are struggling to think of energy builders, try to really pare things back and think about incredibly simple things. For example, it can be as basic as remembering to take our medications and supplements each day and staying hydrated. I am going to share more examples soon so if you are feeling stuck, don't worry.

Giving your energy drainers and builders a value

After I have listed my energy drainers and builders I give each of them a value. I keep it simple. I work on a scale from -3 to +3. The scale works like this:

- -3: The most energy draining
- -2: Moderately energy draining
- -1: Mildly energy draining
- 0: Energy neutral
- +1: Mildly builds energy
- +2: Moderately builds energy
- +3: Gives me the most energy

Negatives are for energy drainers and positives for energy builders. 0 is for anything that is energy neutral (I still count these as energy builders as they can stop me from heading towards a crash or flare up). It's not an exact science, it's simply a method to bring my awareness towards what costs me the most energy and what helps me to feel better.

Identifying energy drainers & builders worksheet

On page 8, I have created a table that you can print off and use to help you identify your energy drainers and builders. I would suggest trying to keep it as simple as possible. There is space for 10 energy builders and 5 for each category of energy drainer (though if you cannot fill them all out that's okay!).

In case you are feeling completely stuck, I've listed an example worksheet on the following page to give you some inspiration.

You may choose to use some (or even all) of these examples. Try to think about the what values are true for you though. Don't overthink it and go with your gut instinct when it comes to assigning values. I appreciate it can be hard (as energy can vary day-to-day) but go with the first number that pops into your head. It's not about being right or wrong here.

Hint: Remember the scale that I use goes from -3 to +3. Feel free to come up with your own scale though! If working to 5 or 10 works best for you, that's absolutely fine.

Continued on the next page...

Example worksheet

Energy Builders		Value
Lying down resting in a dark room		+3
Listening to music		+2
Deep breathing exercises		+2
Eating healthy, nourishing foods		+2
Staying hydrated		+2
Using my far infra red sauna		+1
Visualisations/meditating		+1
EFT (tapping)		+1
Crocheting		0
Watching something easy-going on TV		0
Energy Drainers		
Physical		Value
Qigong		-1
Yoga		-2
Walking		-3
Meeting my fitbit step goal		-3
Mental		Value
Replying to emails		-2
Gaming		-2
Painting		-2
Reading		-2
Blogging		-3
Social		Value
Appointment		-3
Going out for lunch		-3
Socialising at a friend's house		-2
Socialising at home		-1

Continued on the next page...

Worksheet: My Energy Builders & Energy Drainers

Energy Builders		Value
Energy Drainers		
Physical		Value
Mental		Value
Social		Value

How to use:

1. List your energy builders and drainers on the left-hand side under each of the categories.
2. Give each a value:
 - Energy builders recoup energy or stop you from expending more and have a value from 0-3, with 3 being the most energy building and 0 being energy neutral
 - Energy drainers are activities that have a negative effect on your energy and have a value of -1 to -3, with -3 being the most energy draining.

How to balance the books using an activity tracker

Now that we have brought our awareness to what our energy drainers and builders are, we can use them to help us pace ourselves better. Ideally, we want to balance our energy drainers and builders so that we reach the end of the day in credit. The goal is to avoid going into debt and suffering from PEM.

I mentioned before that managing a budget is not easy and the same goes for energy. This isn't a fool proof method to avoid PEM. Life can get in the way, things happen that we have to push ourselves for and scheduling self-care into our day might not always be a top priority. The idea behind this exercise is that it simply helps to bring our awareness towards how we spend our energy so that we can (hopefully) make better choices when we are able to.

As I mentioned above, I use an activity tracker in my bullet journal as a way to balance my energy books. I list my energy drainers and builders in a table and, each day, I mark the activities that I do. I am a very visual person so this works in two ways:

1. It allows me to see exactly where I am spending my energy.
2. It makes it easy to see what activities I can schedule into my day to help me to recoup some energy back.

What I try to do is balance my day so that I am including something physical and mental (doing things that are mentally and physically tiring helps me with sleep). And I make sure to try and balance those activities out by also including some self-care (i.e. energy builders). I find socialising can be both physically and mentally draining so I keep that in mind and make sure not to do too much else (other than self-care) on those days.

I want to reiterate that the idea behind giving values to activities is not because one will necessarily cancel the other out. It's more to bring your awareness towards what costs you the most energy and what helps you to recoup or recover the most. If you do a -3 activity that drains your energy, it is helpful to try and also include a +3 energy builder so that you have the best chance possible of avoiding PEM. But, it won't always work out that way because life with chronic fatigue is far from being that simple!

How to use the activity tracker worksheet

On the last page (page 11) of this e-booklet, I have included a worksheet that you can print off and use as your energy tracker. Here's how to use it:

- Fill out your energy drainers and builders on the left-hand side under each category.

- Next to each activity, there is a column to note down the values you assigned in the previous exercise (i.e. -3 to +3).
- Horizontally, at the top of each section, list the days for the month (M, T, W, Th, F, S, S)
- List the dates (1 to 30 or 31) both horizontally and vertically. I find it helpful to do this so I can easily find the box relating to a specific date.
- Each day, record the activities that you do. I completely colour in the squares with a pen because this helps me visually.

Here is a quick example to show you how I use my tracker:

Energy Builders		Day	T	W	Th	F	S
		Date	1	2	3	4	5
Deep breathing	+3	1					
Visualisations	+1	2					
Listen to music	+2	3					
Lie down in dark room	+3	4					
Crochet	0	5					

Explanation: These are a few of my energy builders that are listed in my activity tracker. On Tuesday the 1st, I did deep breathing and listened to music. On Wednesday, I did visualisations and I crocheted. On Thursday, I lay down and rested in a dark room. Friday self-care was visualisations and listening to music. Finally, on Saturday I did deep-breathing and spent time lying down and resting in a dark room.

This example only shows a small fraction of the tracker but I hope it gives you a good visualisation on how to fill it out.

Conclusion

Tracking and balancing my energy drainers and balancers is one strategy that I use to help me pace myself better and manage my chronic fatigue. I have found the exercises listed in this e-book helpful as they have made me more aware of where I spend my energy. Additionally, it helps me to better plan my days so that I am also including self-care.

I hope you have found this e-booklet and the print-outs helpful. I would love to hear your feedback so that I can create more e-booklets that you will find useful. Please let me know your thoughts via email: donna@februarystars.co.uk. I always appreciate and value your input.

Worksheet: Monthly Activity Tracker

[illegible]