

neurodegenerative and autoimmune disorders recovery or cure?



BY JOHN COLEMAN

Neurodegenerative and autoimmune disorders such as Parkinson's disease, multiple sclerosis, chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy and ankylosing spondylitis (plus many others) are generally considered to be progressive, degenerative and incurable. All evidence to date points to this, yet some people continue to get well. Are they "cured" or do they "recover"? Is there a difference?

Curing is what they do to bacon; they take a pig, slaughter it, cut it up, smoke it, salt it, preserve it, then serve it as breakfast. We cure ham, plastic and concrete.¹ Some disease symptoms can also be cured by cutting (surgery), poisoning (chemotherapy) or burning (irradiation).

When we lose a treasure, we don't cure it, we recover it. Illness indicates that we have lost our health – surely the greatest treasure of all. So we can work to recover our treasure, our health.

In 1995, I developed symptoms of advanced Parkinson's disease with some symptoms of early stage multi system atrophy. I was told by Western and complementary medical practitioners alike that the best I could do was control the symptoms for a little while. Inevitably, I would become more and more helpless and eventually require full-time care.^{2,3,4} As I was only 52 and felt that I had yet to fulfil my life, this was not a pleasant outlook. I set off on a journey of discovery to find ways to survive each day a little better, with less pain and improved energy. I had no thought of cure or recovery; I simply had to find enough wellness to look after myself.

By mid-1998, I found that I was free of symptoms (recovered) and set about finding out why I had achieved this when it was thought impossible.

My journey is similar to other, more famous journeys. Petrea King and Ian Gawler both recovered from 'incurable' cancer. Each in their own way set about making each day more beautiful and survivable without looking for cure or recovery.^{5,6}

Barbara Brewster, Rachel Breslow and Deborah Spring have all recovered from diagnosed multiple sclerosis. Each walked their own journey, yet showed similarities with Petrea King and Ian Gawler in finding peace, coming to terms with their own integrity and honesty, and using meditation as one of the vehicles for this.^{7,8}

Since my own recovery, I have worked with over two thousand people diagnosed with a variety of neurodegenerative and autoimmune disorders. Each person has told their story with insight and honesty as we worked together; sometimes at the first visit, while with others it took many months and several visits to find the details of their descent into illness. Each story included similarities with the stories of those of us who have recovered.

With this evidence plus research from around the world, we now have a much clearer picture of why we experience serious, chronic and degenerative illnesses that may be life threatening or life sentences.^{9,10} We believe that the initiating circumstance that begins the long, usually slow, decline into a chronic nerve disorder is the suppression of the fight/flight/freeze response early in life; probably between conception and late teens. This creates a redistribution of chemical energy and water from areas not needed during running and fighting into areas most needed for immediate action.²

The fight/flight/freeze response is a beautiful, life-saving process required for individual and species survival when it is resolved in reasonable time through action. However, the 'dangers' we encounter so often today are very different from the clearly delineated dangers encountered and survived by our hunter/gatherer ancestors 40,000 or more years ago, when the fight/flight/freeze response was developed. In those days, our ancestors faced fire, cold, lack of food or water,

predators or enemies as basic, easily recognised dangers. Other circumstances were safe and our body reacted accordingly.^{2,9,10} Now we live in a society that may impose dangers on our body even though, intellectually, we feel safe. For instance, there are over 150,000 neurotoxic chemicals in our environment that were not there 50 years ago.¹⁰

Many other traumas are obvious – abuse of various types, loss of a parent, child or sibling, life-threatening disease or accident. Some are not so obvious. For instance, a woman who was implicitly blamed by her father for her mother's miscarriage; a woman adopted into a loving family after nine months of bonding to her birth mother; a man whose father was a workaholic and was not around for any of his son's activities or to develop a relationship.

Sometimes it is simply being born at a time or place that is traumatic. For instance, those born in Europe just before or during WWII, or in Eastern Europe during the Soviet occupation. Their families lived in fear and uncertainty; babies were conceived and born into traumatic circumstances. For those predisposed to neurodegenerative or autoimmune disorders, this may be the initiating stress overload.

Stress can be good for us as it motivates us to activity, and provides the physiological resources for that activity.¹⁰ Trauma need not be physically damaging if it is treated and resolved healthily and wholistically.¹⁰ But this is rare in the sorts of trauma mentioned above.

Prolonged stress and unresolved trauma trigger our body into continuous stress reactions that, over a long time, become damaging.^{2,10}

The initial physiological reaction to any type of significant stress or trauma is the fight/flight/freeze response. Simply put, the process is this:

- Some adrenal hormones are directly triggered by stress and trauma
- Stress and trauma stimulate the hypothalamus to release Corticotropin-Releasing Hormone (CRH).
- CRH stimulates the release of Adrenocorticotrophic Hormone (ACTH) from the pituitary gland.
- ACTH regulates the excretion of other hormones from the adrenal glands.

Meditation is a powerful way to change the program of our hypothalamus and move towards wellness. It is important to note that *all those who have fully recovered from any neurological disorder have devoted a great deal of time and dedication to meditation and personal/spiritual development of some sort.*

Meditation was considered weird, whacky and way out by conservative therapists for many years, and most doctors felt it had no place in modern medicine. However, studies over the past few years have changed that perception dramatically. We now know that meditation, practised daily over time, can help us maintain or regain health.^{11,12,13,14} Controlled trials, open surveys and electroencephalograph (EEG) studies are all showing positive health benefits for those who meditate regularly.^{11,12,13,14}

Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn, Associate Professor of Medicine in the Division of Preventive and Behavioural Medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, conducts eight-week courses called the 'Stress Reduction and Relaxation Program'.¹² People completing the eight-week program and practising meditation at home daily find that their illness symptoms reduce by an average of 37 percent without any other change to treatment.¹² The Stress Reduction and Relaxation Program does not focus on any person's condition or specific symptoms; participants learn to meditate in a certain way, and practise that daily.

Long-term studies have shown that meditation can lower levels of stress hormones including adrenaline (one of the chemicals implicated in the onset of neurodegenerative and autoimmune disorders), which can have beneficial effects on blood pressure and cholesterol levels.¹³ EEG studies show that meditators have improved blood circulation, lowered levels of lactic acid (leading to reduced pain and anxiety), reduced heart rate and enhanced immune systems.¹³

Dr Jill Marjama-Lyons, neurologist of Jacksonville, Florida, says that "recent studies in psychoneuroimmunology show that the mind can communicate with the nervous, immune and endocrine systems." She also says that "mind-body techniques are particularly useful in the stress-reduction areas, helping to reduce blood pressure, pain, headaches, asthma and other illness with a strong stress component."¹¹

Meditation is simple, elegant and rewarding. It requires us to set aside some time each day (5 to 60 minutes) and fill our mind with a thought of beauty and peace. It's like practising the piano or training for sport: the more we do it, the more natural it becomes. And it's free! There are some very useful guided meditation CDs available from various shops as well as binaural-frequency meditation CDs that help our brain produce 'meditation frequencies',

enhancing the meditation experience. These cost only around \$30 but do need to be played through stereo headphones.¹⁵

We all know that **laughter** makes us feel good. We enjoy chuckling, giggling, laughing out loud, a good belly laugh. But we don't always realise why we feel good.

Scientists studying the physiology of laughter have found that many of the chemical changes that occur during laughter are the same as those that occur during exercise.^{11,16} Endorphins (our natural painkillers) and many neurotransmitters are boosted during laughter, while stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline are suppressed.^{11,16,17}

Laughter also improves our immune system. Cells that produce antibodies, T-cells and natural killer cells increase in number,^{11,16,17} while gamma interferon and immunoglobulin A are preserved or increased in production.^{16,17} So laughter not only *makes* us feel good, it *IS* good for us.^{16,17}

Okay, you're feeling pretty down about being diagnosed with a neurodegenerative or autoimmune disorder, you're struggling to do many of the things you used to find enjoyable, and you just don't see that there's much to laugh about. Don't worry about it, *pretend* to laugh; even faking a laugh will bring about the physiological changes that are good for us.¹⁶ Even better, watching humorous movies, hearing jokes or reading funny books without laughing will still bring positive changes.^{11,16} People recovering from surgery in a Florida hospital who were allowed to watch their favourite funny movies needed less painkillers than those who watched no humour or who had to watch what they were told.¹⁶

Laughter can boost our immune system, reduce pain, exercise our body and make us feel good. There are no toxic side effects and laughter costs nothing! But we don't do it enough! Children playing in a safe environment laugh between 300 and 400 times each day.^{11,16} As adults, we laugh perhaps fifteen to seventeen times daily.^{11,16} What a reduction in self-help that is! Just by laughing or *pretending* to laugh thirty times each day we can double all the benefits.

The **Aqua Hydration Formulas** are homeopathic remedies available from many health food stores and pharmacies. They are the only remedies I have found that genuinely reset the hypothalamus to distribute water to cells dehydrated over many years.¹⁸ These remedies are very powerful and need to be used cautiously to achieve the best results – although they are totally safe and non-toxic.²

There is much fine research investigating the relationship between food, gut function and brain health, and a lot of new knowledge is now being presented to health practitioners. However, one fact stands strongly through all the research; we still have a hunter/gatherer body, and need to move as closely as possible to a

hunter/gatherer diet ('Paleo-eating'). Too great an emphasis on saturated fats and grains creates a chronic inflammatory condition in our body, causing discomfort, pain and suppression of our immune system. We have a great deal of control over what we eat, even though we may struggle to find fresh, organic food.

My own experience indicates that a diet *high in omega-3 fatty acids, and very low in saturated fats, sugar and refined carbohydrates*, modified for your individual needs, is probably the most beneficial of all.² We require omega-3 fatty acids for cell membrane integrity and many activities in our body. Omega-6 fatty acids (found in margarines, common cooking oils, meats, especially organ meats, dairy products and other animal products) are required for inflammatory responses when needed. However, our hunter/gatherer ancestors ate a ratio of four omega-3s to one omega-6, while we commonly consume only one omega-3 for every eighteen omega 6s. Is it any wonder that we see so many chronic inflammatory disorders?

One of the best ways to start modifying your diet is to keep a food diary for two weeks, writing down absolutely everything that you eat and drink each day. Nobody has to see it except you, so you can be completely honest.

My personal and clinical experience shows that we need to base our eating around *fresh vegetables* (raw or steamed), plus *fresh fruit, nuts and seeds*. Deep-sea fish three times a week plus flaxseeds will boost omega-3 intake, plus small amounts of very lean meat (young and preferably 'game') if necessary for iron intake. At least *70% of our diet must come from vegetables* – or more if we can manage it.² Vegetables are the most 'natural' complex foods available to us today.

Omega-3 fatty acids are most easily obtained from flax seeds or flax seed oil, other seeds, nuts and avocado. (In a non-vegetarian diet, they are also available from fish, especially cold water fish). One or more of these foods should be eaten every day.

Dairy products may be replaced with rice or oat milk (in moderate quantities) – if you need 'milk' (milk is *not* a natural food for humans). While cows' milk contains a lot of calcium, it is very difficult for humans to absorb and may inhibit calcium absorption from other foods.² Those societies consuming the highest amounts of dairy products also show the highest rates of osteoporosis. Calcium is more readily available from green vegetables (especially broccoli stalks), sardines, tuna, sesame seeds and a variety of other foods.²

Eggs provide excellent protein and can be safely eaten several times each week. They are often maligned by people scared of cholesterol. However, we manufacture about 80% to 100% of our cholesterol in our body, and this is utilised for a large number of important functions. The

Major hormones released by the adrenals are:

- adrenaline
- mineralocorticoids (aldosterone)
- glucocorticoids (cortisol)
- adrenal androgens (testosterone)

Adrenaline:

- Increases blood glucose levels
- Increases glycogen breakdown
- Increases intracellular metabolism of glucose in skeletal muscles (ready for action)
- Increases breakdown of fats in adipose (fatty) tissue
- Increases heart rate
- Increases force of heart contraction
- Constricts blood vessels in skin, kidneys, gastrointestinal tract and other organs not needed for fight/flight
- Dilates blood vessels in skeletal and cardiac muscle.

Aldosterone:

- Increases rate of sodium re-absorption in kidneys
 - Increased plasma sodium
 - Increased water re-absorption
 - Increased blood volume
- Increases potassium excretion
- Increases hydrogen ion excretion (leading to acidic urine)
- Changes in sodium/potassium balance can affect cellular hydration, cell membrane function and transport to and from cells.

Cortisol:

- Increases breakdown of fats
- Decreases glucose and amino-acid storage in skeletal muscles
- Increases glucose synthesis from amino acids in the liver leading to increased blood glucose
- Increases protein degradation (eventually leading to muscle weakness/atrophy, osteoporosis)
- Decreases inflammatory response by decreasing number of white cells and the expression of inflammatory chemicals (leading to a depressed immune system)

Testosterone:

- Increases pubic and axillary hair
- Increases sexual drive (but may reduce potency)

Short-term stress is a normal part of life. We need it for motivation, and we need the physiological responses to stress in order to survive. Our forebears faced immediate dangers and stimuli every day in living as discussed above.^{2,9,10} In all these cases, the stress was resolved quite quickly – they won or lost, caught the prey or waited until the next day, got away or got eaten.^{2,10}

We have negative feedback systems to adjust levels of adrenal hormones so they do not become damaging. However, *continuous stress can override these negative feedback systems* so that we go on hyper-producing these chemicals.^{2,10} Evolution, in deciding that a response to all stress was necessary, didn't bargain on the long-term stresses of Western society. Furthermore, Western society has developed so quickly that our evolution processes can't keep up; our physiological ability to cope with modern stresses has lagged way behind the development of those stressors.^{2,10}

Many stresses in this society are not resolved, and many traumas go unrecognised.¹⁰ We live surrounded by noise, pollution, busy-ness and poisons. Child abuse is the world's best-kept secret; family breakdown is seen as traumatic for the partners, but not necessarily for the children; the loss of a sibling or grandparent or friend is often borne in silence by the young in our society.

Prolonged and unresolved stress or trauma can result in:

- Increased plasma sodium and decreased potassium, affecting many bodily functions
- Cellular dehydration through hypothalamic changes
- Chronic heart stress and failure
- Alkalosis and reflux
- Hypertension (high blood pressure)
- Weak skeletal muscles
- Acidic urine
- Hyperglycaemia (diabetes)
- Deficient immune system
- Muscle atrophy (shrinkage)
- General weakness and debility
- Osteoporosis
- Weak capillaries
- Thin skin that bruises easily
- Impaired wound healing
- Inappropriate fat distribution
- Mood swings
- Menstrual irregularities

People facing prolonged unresolved stress or trauma will respond in different ways, possibly dictated by their genetic inheritance and/or environment. Some will develop illnesses such as heart disease, cancer, arthritis, diabetes, skin disorders, depression or other psychological disorders, gastric ulcers or inappropriate behaviours such as substance addictions, addictive gambling or violent behaviour.¹⁰

Some people will develop neurodegenerative or autoimmune disorders. This can occur because the reprogramming of the hypothalamus and cellular dehydration, as well as many of the other effects listed above, allow some brain cells to become damaged, inactive or even die, over many years, ultimately resulting in the expression of neurodegenerative or autoimmune disorder symptoms.

Unresolved stress/trauma is not necessarily the 'cause' of neurodegenerative and autoimmune disorders, but can begin the slow degeneration that leads to cell fragility and damage.^{2,10} All the people I see have a history of stress triggers throughout life, and a high degree of imposed responsibility for others, which is also a factor in disease development.

Once we recognise that our diagnosed neurodegenerative or autoimmune disorder is not our fault, and there is a logical development process, we can create strategies to reverse the process and perhaps recover. We can also largely ignore the names (diagnosis) given to our disorder, as the process of development is always the same.

This process revolves around the hypothalamus/pituitary/adrenal axis (these are the organs and control centres that demand the over-production of the stress hormones). For many years, practitioners sought to relieve the common symptoms of fatigue and anxiety by boosting adrenal strength and activity. However, since 1997, it has become far more helpful to work with the hypothalamus and change the way our body distributes water and energy.²

The important aspect of this change in emphasis is that we have the power to change much of our hypothalamic activity without resorting to practitioners or expensive remedies. Certainly, there are no satisfactory drugs to do this, and only a few complementary therapies to help us, so it's primarily up to us to reverse this process of degeneration, thus reversing our symptoms.

Firstly, our hypothalamus responds to thoughts, impressions and perceptions; therefore, changing the way we view ourselves through affirmations, self-talk or similar techniques may begin the move towards better health. Our hypothalamus may produce less CRH, thus reducing production of stress hormones.² ➤

cholesterol in fresh, free-range eggs is well utilised by most people. Eggs, as part of a sensible low-fat, high-natural-fibre diet are a good food.

Sugar, other refined carbohydrates, artificial colourings and flavourings and processed foods should all be eliminated.

Diet drinks are particularly 'toxic' because the aspartame sweetener is up to five times more active when combined with other drink ingredients. Aspartame and the newer version known as Neotane is one of the most neurotoxic chemicals known! Never consume it or any other artificial sweetener in either food or drink.

Drink 1 to 2 litres (5 to 8 glasses) of clean, **pure water** daily (without fluoride or chlorine if possible), plus dilute fruit juices, herbal teas and/or coffee substitutes. Fresh vegetable juices are an excellent way to improve enzyme activity and boost energy.

There are many therapies in Western and complementary medicine that may help us. We can choose our therapy, and we need to be alert for those therapists who brush us off, refuse to answer questions, or try to dictate to us. This is our body, our journey and our responsibility.

We can improve our health. There may not be a cure, but I for one much prefer to regain my treasure of health and recover.

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By August 1995, John Coleman had lost his power of speech and was wondering how he could go on living. Suffering symptoms of stage IV Parkinson's disease, as diagnosed by six medical and complementary practitioners, he was unable to walk more than 5 metres without assistance, and would take up to an hour and a half to dress himself. Severely dissatisfied with the treatment and prognosis he received from Western medical practitioners, John decided to pursue other pathways to health. With the aid of homeopathy, Aqua Hydration Formulas, Bowen therapy, craniosacral therapy, flower essences, counselling, meditation and spiritual development, John was completely symptom-free by April 1998.

John, a naturopath and Bowen therapist, was co-founder of 'Very Special Kids' in 1984 and founder of the Neuro-Recovery Foundation in 2001. He lives in Melbourne among almost-controlled chaos with some flourishing potted plants, conducts Neuro Recovery Pathways programs at Petrea King's Quest For Life Centre in Bundanoon, NSW, and lectures around Australia to practitioners and lay people. During 2006-07, he plans to lecture in Europe, UK, USA and Canada. His first book, *Stop Parkin' and Start Livin'*, has been released by Michelle Anderson Publishing and is available in the NHS Book Shop - see review page 71.

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