
Finding Your Energy Envelope, Part 1

By Bruce Campbell

Living with CFS or fibromyalgia is frustrating. Not only do the two conditions bring pain and discomfort, they also impose limits. If we fight against or try to ignore those limits, the result is an intensification of symptoms. This article and the next one will propose another way to live with CFS or FM. I'll suggest how finding and honoring your limits (your energy envelope) can give you some control and improve your quality of life.

The Energy Envelope

To use the idea of the energy envelope, think of your situation as having three elements. The first is your *available energy*. This is the energy you have to accomplish things. It is limited and is replenished by rest and food. The second is your *expended energy*, the energy you lose through physical, mental and emotional exertion. The third is your *symptoms*, fatigue, brain fog, pain, and so on. In this view, if you expend more energy than you have available, you will intensify your symptoms. This is called living *outside the energy envelope*. An alternative is living *inside the energy envelope*. If you keep your expended energy within the limits of your available energy, you have a chance to reduce symptoms, and over time may be able to expand your limits.

Many students in our program have found it helpful to think of their life using the idea of the energy envelope in this way. To explain higher than usual symptoms, they may say "I was outside my envelope this week." This statement may sound like an admission of defeat, but it implies the possibility of control: if you can live differently, you may be able to gain greater control of your symptoms.

Finding Your Limits: A Quick Answer

If you would like a general idea of your limits, rate yourself on the CFS & Fibromyalgia Rating Scale. Most of the students in our course have rated themselves between 25 and 45 at the start of the course, but we have had people across almost the full range of the scale.

Everyone's Situation is Different

Each person's limits are different, because each person's situation is unique. To understand your limits, I suggest you look at three factors.

The first, which you can think of as the medical aspect of your situation, is your *illness or illnesses*. While some people have just CFS or fibromyalgia, about two thirds of the people in our program struggle with two or more medical problems. The most common pattern is people who have CFS and fibromyalgia, but frequently people who have one or both of these conditions also have one or more other medical issues, such as arthritis, back and spinal problems, depression, food and chemical allergies, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), lupus, myofascial pain, sleep disorders like apnea and restless legs syndrome, and thyroid problems. (For more, see our article on overlapping and related conditions.)

Long-term illness is much more than a medical condition. The second factor that defines your unique situation is your general *life circumstances*. Illness will have a different impact depending on such things as your stage in life and family situation. In this context, finances and support are particularly crucial.

Some patients find their financial situation to be similar to what it was before they became ill. They may be supported by a spouse or receive disability payments that replace their previous income. For others, however, financial pressures can be great, even overwhelming. Some may live alone, trying to get by on little or no income. Others may feel forced to work when their bodies are asking for rest.

Patients' levels of support can vary greatly, also. The term "support" applies to both practical and emotional help. Practical support may mean assistance with tasks such as grocery shopping, cooking and cleaning. Emotional support means feeling that someone understands and cares. Some patients have supportive spouses or other family members, while others may find themselves in stressful circumstances. Some people have good friendship networks, others not. Many patients' level of support can be improved through effort.

The third factor is *coping skills*. Your ability to live well with chronic illness depends in part on your own resourcefulness. We have seen many people respond to adversity with flexibility and resilience. Luckily coping skills, like other skills, can be learned and improved through practice.

In summary, each person's situation is different. Your limits will be shaped by your particular combination of illness, financial and family circumstances, and coping skills. While some factors are fixed, support and coping skills can be improved over time.

A Bowl of Marbles & The Spoon Theory

If the idea of the energy envelope isn't appealing, you might consider other ways to think about your limits. Some people, for example, like to visualize their limits. One version of this approach is to imagine available energy as a bowl of marbles. With this image, you see yourself as having a limited number of marbles to use each day. The number may vary from day to day. With each activity, you mentally take one or more marbles out of the bowl. Physical activity uses up your

supply, but mental and emotional activity do as well. For example, if you feel frustrated about how few marbles you have, the frustration will take some marbles, too.

Another way to think about limits is called the Spoon Theory, which is explained in an article written by a Lupus patient. She describes how she once explained her limits to a friend by having the friend imagine that each task she did used up limited energy, symbolized by a fixed number of spoons.

Two Ways to Expand Limits

The fact that frustration uses marbles shows that the way we react to events can affect the amount of energy available to us. If we can respond in a relaxed manner to stressful situations, we can preserve energy that might otherwise be dissipated in tension and anxiety.

A student in one of our classes gave a good example. At a birthday party one year, she took on the role of the good hostess, moving about and worrying whether everyone was having a good time. She found herself tired and cranky after an hour. At a similar party a year later, she decided to imagine herself as a queen who was observing the situation from a throne. Freed from the self-imposed expectation that she should make sure everyone enjoyed themselves, she found herself with good energy for more than two hours. By relaxing, she reduced her worry and extended her energy.

How we rest can affect the energy available to us, too. Taking a short rest break to re-charge batteries can expand the number of productive hours in the day. Also, we may be able to avoid a long period of "downtime" by taking a brief rest as soon as an intensification of symptoms begins.

A dramatic example of the value of taking frequent short rests was provided by one of our students. At the beginning of the course, she was resting six hours during the day, taking two naps of three hours each. She decided to break up her day into one- and two-hour blocks, taking a 10 to 15 minute rest during each block. Using this strategy, she reduced her total rest time by an hour and a half a day after two months. Four months later she was resting three hours a day, half as much as before the course. By taking frequent short rests, she added three hours of productive time to her day, without increasing her symptoms. Her flexible approach enabled her to expand her envelope.

In Part 2, I'll describe how you can develop a detailed understanding of your limits.

Related Articles

- **Living Within My Envelope: A How-To Story**

JoWynn Johns describes how she reduced her symptoms and brought stability to her life

by finding and honoring her body's limits. (From the Success Stories series.)

- **Key 4: Find Your Limits**

Article on the Energy Envelope in the series Ten Keys to Successful Coping.

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Finding Your Energy Envelope, Part 2

By Bruce Campbell

In part 1 of this article, I discussed how you might use the idea of the energy envelope in a general way, asking whether doing something would take you "outside the envelope" or whether you are living "inside the envelope." I used the idea in that way myself at first and found it very helpful. Thinking of the envelope was a reminder both of my limits and of my ability to control my symptoms to some degree by staying within my limits.

After a while, however, I thought the concept would be even more helpful if I could understand the limits in different areas of my life. So I began to ask myself a series of questions: how much sleep do I need at night? how much daytime rest? how much time can I spend safely on the computer? how long can I stand at one time without intensifying my symptoms? how far can I walk?

Developing a Detailed Understanding

Over time, I ended up with a list of about a dozen items. In addition to those just mentioned, I included activity limits (how long I could do various activities like driving, housework, reading, and spending time with people), stressors in my life, food sensitivities, sensitivity to light and noise, and emotions. It took me at least a year to develop this more detailed understanding, but I felt rewarded all along the way because every limit I defined helped me gain more control.

Here's a sample of my energy envelope from 1998, when I had been ill for about a year and a half.

<i>Sleep</i>	7 1/2 hours, starting by 11 pm
<i>Daytime Rest</i>	10-30 minutes on most days, sometimes more
<i>Activity</i>	Usually OK for activities like errands & housework, in moderation
<i>Exercise</i>	45 minutes walking OK on level ground
<i>Reading & Computer</i>	Reading OK most of time, but must limit time on computer, especially at night
<i>Driving</i>	Limit about 2 hours, sometimes tired after 30 minutes
<i>Standing</i>	Limit 1 hour, whether walking, shopping, cooking
<i>Socializing</i>	Usually OK with one person or small group but respond strongly to some people and vulnerable to stressful encounters

<i>Other Illnesses</i>	Make CFIDS symptoms 30-50% worse. Secondary illnesses are more severe now than before
<i>Emotions</i>	More easily upset than before. Strong emotions trigger CFIDS symptoms
<i>Stressors</i>	Life mostly stable at present, thankfully
<i>Food</i>	Haven't found any food sensitivities so far. Diet same as before
<i>Sense Data</i>	Noisy settings and loud noises are very bothersome, e.g. restaurants

Later I added a section to the end of my definition, in which I noted my major limits and my greatest vulnerabilities. This section was a helpful summary of my current situation and also suggested where work might give the biggest payoff in reduction of symptoms.

I learned a lot from studying my envelope. One surprising realization was that my limits were more restrictive in some areas. During a period of time in which I thought that overall I was at about 60% of my pre-illness level of functioning, I could do only about 30% as much exercise.

I found it very helpful to share my envelope definition with selected others. Getting outsiders' views of my situation helped me to be more realistic in my self-assessment and also helped others to understand me better.

Getting Started

If you want to define your energy envelope in detail, you might begin by assessing yourself in the 12 areas mentioned above or use models like those provided in the success stories from Dean Anderson or JoWynn Johns. In any case, the goal is to assemble a thorough understanding of your limits, so you know what you individually have to do to minimize symptoms and increase your chances for improvement. Such a description can also highlight your areas of vulnerability and thus help you set priorities for change. Maybe improving sleep would bring the biggest payoff at the present time or perhaps a stressful relationship needs attention. Whatever your circumstances, taking a systematic approach can help you understand your unique situation.

Developing a detailed description of your envelope is a gradual process. It may take months or even longer. But every step you take will be useful; any understanding you develop can help you feel better now. And that is the goal: to improve your quality of life now.

Learning Through Experiments

Another way to understand your envelope is by trying experiments and keeping records. I applied this approach in several areas, including exercise. Through experimenting with walking at different times of day, I discovered that exercising in the afternoon was much less likely to lead to higher symptoms than exercising in the morning. The realization led to the conclusion

that time of day was crucial: when I did something could be as important as how much. When I tried extending my walks, I observed that I sometimes felt fine during the walk but experienced strong symptoms afterwards or had to take a nap later in the day. That experience helped me to realize that the effects of activity might be delayed. From that I learned that to understand my limits I had to be attentive to how I felt later as well as during and right after an activity. I also observed that sometimes the effects of activity were cumulative, so that I might feel tired after several days of exercise at a certain level.

Two Special Areas: Stress and Relationships

I'd like to add some comments on two especially important areas: stress and relationships. Because CFIDS and fibromyalgia are very stress-sensitive illnesses, understanding sources of stress and what can be done about them is a crucial part of defining the envelope. You might list stressors in your life to identify those that place the greatest limits on you, and then try to pair them up with stress management techniques that seem to offer hope that you can interrupt the cycle in which symptoms and stress reinforce one another.

In the area of relationships, I suggest you consider three different sets of issues.

First, you might try to answer the following questions to give yourself an overall idea of your limits in the area of relationships:

- How much time per day can you spend safely with other people?
- How many people can you interact with at one time?
- What are your limits in different settings, for example at home vs. in a restaurant?
- What are the effects of different types of contact, for example email, phone and in person?
- Are your limits different with some people than with others?

Second, it may be helpful to analyze specific relationships, especially those you have with the most important people in your life. Are these relationships in general supportive or tension-filled? Are others understanding and sympathetic to your situation?

Lastly, you can assess the possibility for change in relationships, either changes you make or change in others. Changes you make might include relating differently to others, changing your attitude or changing the type or amount of contact.

Summary

Your energy envelope is a description of your unique limits and therefore what you uniquely have to do to have a good day or to minimize your symptoms. It may include items such as the amount of sleep you need at night, how many hours a day you can be active, and the length and

type of social contact. It is your list of things to do (and not to do) to feel better.

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