



## Case Study:

### Why emotions matter in fatigue recovery

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#### **Jess Thompson - [00:00:16]**

Welcome to the Super Fatigue Super Conference, my name is Jess Thompson and I'm the director of psychology at the Optimum Health Clinic.

I'm joined today by Nikkie Foster, who's a psychology practitioner, also at the OHC. Hi, Nikkie.

#### **Nikkie Foster**

Hi.

#### **Jess Thompson**

Hi there. I lead a team of practitioners, working with really the whole range of people with fatigue related conditions. We do a lot of work with people with severe Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, M.E., fibromyalgia and more recently long-COVID.

But we also work with people who are struggling with energy and fatigue as part of the picture, but perhaps it's not absolutely debilitating in terms of their lives so it hasn't led to a diagnosis of these conditions.

Over the last two decades, the Optimum Health Clinic psychology approach has really evolved. This evolution has come about through a combination of working with a huge number of clients, studying different approaches and different ways of working, as well as following the research.

And the result is that we've developed and evolved our own model of fatigue related conditions. We talk about it in more detail in some of the other case studies. This model not only helps to guide the work we do with clients, but it also gives the clients a sense of really understanding the illness they're experiencing, how and why it's happened, and, of course, importantly, how to work through it towards recovery.

We have a very strong emphasis on what works in a real world clinical setting and a place to be able to share these case studies with you to give you a sense of the ways in which we work.

So today we're going to be discussing a real life case from the practitioner Nikkie's perspective. This client, Naomi, has also done an interview for this conference on a recovery story. So we have both sides of the story, so to speak. This case illustrates a few key things about the way we work with clients suffering with Chronic Fatigue, ME or fibromyalgia.

So to start off with, Nikkie, can you give us some background to this case? What was going on for this client when she first started to work with you?

### **Nikkie Foster - [00:02:03]**

Yeah, of course. So Naomi came to us with a diagnosis of ME, having had it for about 10 to 12 months with onset, really after a high period of stress at work, recurring bladder infections, volunteering during weekends and managing quite complicated family dynamics.

She had five main symptoms. She had lack of energy, so fatigue, was getting wiped out really quickly; flu like symptoms, and interestingly, she was taking paracetamol to kind of manage and work through this; tiredness; and unrefreshed sleep. And we also scored something called the maladaptive stress response, which for her was really quite high.

### **Jess Thompson**

Ok. Can you just take a moment here to explain what the maladaptive stress response is for those listeners who may not have heard us explain it yet?

### **Nikkie Foster**

Yeah, of course. So a well functioning nervous system has two basic options. One that it uses when we're safe, and one that it uses when we're under threat. In threat mode, there are a few sort of sub options, if you like, fight flight freeze and fawning, which is essentially people pleasing.

When the system detects threats, it will choose which one of the sub options is best to utilize. And once the threat is over, the system returns to safe mode.

If the nervous system spends too much time in threat mode, it ends up recalibrating itself to effectively stay there, rather than come back out into safe mode. And this is essentially what the maladaptive stress response is. The nervous system stuck in a place of stress, on a chronic basis.

Now, of course, when we're ill with fatigue related conditions, there's a lot for the system to stay stressed about. We will worry about how long we're ill for, whether we're going to recover, what to do about work, kids life, etc. in the meantime.

And so, the nervous system not only becomes, but stays maladaptively stressed, rather than coming back into safe mode. And it's one of the key reasons that people can be ill with fatigue related conditions for such a long time.

So in Naomi's case, she didn't feel particularly stressed when I first met her, but she absolutely recognized that she reacted strongly to stressful things. And it was that that told me her maladaptive stress response was pretty high.

So she was working as a consultant with a life coaching business, but had been off work for a few months and was working with one of our practitioners, Kirsty, in nutrition at the same time.

### **Jess Thompson**

OK, so it sounds as though she had some really significant symptoms when she found us, which were really affecting her life. So can you talk us through where you started with this client and why you started there?

### **Nikkie Foster**

Yeah. So the first place, really, was to be really clear on what got her to kind of [inaudible], if you like, which allowed her to realize what was going on for her, health-wise, and for us to work with the fear around being able to, or the fear of really sort of resting and being able to take stock during her last month off work.

So there were a number of things that she recognized. Firstly, she was able to see that she helped her mom out from a really young age. She has a younger brother who's got Down Syndrome. And that meant pushing her own needs aside in favor of other's needs. And of course, she learned to do this young. So that was quite primary as a way of being for her, even as an adult.

She had an achiever tendency that caused her to be overcommitted, and favored doing rather than being.

And we linked, well we connected the dots, between recurring infections and fatigue, something that she hadn't really been able to see before.

### **Jess Thompson - [00:05:51]**

So it sounds like helping her to really understand her illness, and the predisposing and perpetuating factors, really helped to stabilize things for her. Is that often the case?

### **Nikkie Foster**

Yeah, definitely. And it's because, when people see that symptoms are a healthy sign of an overloaded system, and they can see what is causing that overload, it massively reduces the stress around being sick. Because, there's a logic to it, I guess. And, you know, stress not only exacerbate symptoms, but it often makes them vary wildly from one day to the next, which is also quite stressful and difficult to manage.

So for Naomi, being able to see the dots between these recurring bouts of infection and fatigue was a real lightning bolt moment for her, which allowed the stress to be able to be understood a bit more and thus be less scary.

### **Jess Thompson**

That makes total sense. And we talk about boatloads as part of our model of fatigue related conditions. So the person is the boat, and over time their system has become overloaded, by both psychological and physiological factors. So for Naomi, there was the tendency to help and to put others first, the achiever tendency, but also that physiological recurring infections that were loads on her boat.

And usually for people, either slowly over time, as in this case, or suddenly due to a final straw, the boat sinks and the person experiences so many symptoms, they get stuck at the bottom of the ocean.

And what happens often then, which is the case for Naomi, is the stress of being so ill, kicks in. With lots of fear around what symptoms mean, whether they'll ever recover. And we think of this fear and stress, about the illness itself, as being like a really heavy net that holds the boat down.

And so for this client, as Nikkie was just describing, as is the case for many people, being helped to understand this process of overloading and sinking, and being supported to figure out what the loads are for them, actually has a really significant impact. It allows them to drop some of those fearful patterns about the symptoms and illness, which means the net that was holding them down has effectively been removed.

And for some clients, just this process has an enormous impact. Because over the time of being ill, they may have already unloaded many of the loads, physiological and psychological, so just removing the net means their boat can float again.

So what happened next in the journey with this client?

**Nikkie Foster - [00:08:14]**

So this is where we really worked on, kind of, her mental approach to her body. Her prevailing perspective was that it was perfectly normal for her mind to push her body to help and achieve even when her body needed rest.

So by doing this, it allowed her to inhabit her body and learn to listen to what it was telling her, what she needed in the short term and the long term. Often what she was needing was rest at this point, instead of more doing or more helping.

And it was really the mind that was overriding her ability to listen. So we were working with her really learning to read what she wanted and what she needed and then implementing that in the world. So having better boundaries with others, being able to engage in personal power to live the life that she wanted, and listening to emotions to help her know what she wanted.

Now, because Naomi was a life coach already, a lot of this phase was actually about me teaching her a different way of looking at her emotions, teaching her a different way of looking at helper and achiever tendencies and helping her see the mind's dominance over her body.

What she would do between sessions then, was to use journaling, emotional freedom technique, our STOP technique, to really work through these issues independently. And actually by this point, symptoms and her maladaptive stress response had really reduced quite significantly.

**Jess Thompson**

OK, so it sounds like the achiever and helper patterns, partly, sound like they were really key. Working on those was key to reducing that maladaptive stress response. Is this common in your experience of working with clients?

**Nikkie Foster**

Yeah, absolutely. And it's really because both ways of being in the world are inherently stressful. You know, if you're super outcome driven, at the expense of your body's need, then you're likely to override downtime. And it's the same with over-helping, beyond our means.

Now, downtime, of course, is non-negotiable. But we often don't actually realize that. So we have to look at the reasons for overriding our bodies' needs. And for many clients, that comes down to a sense of not being good enough, like in Naomi's case, unless she was achieving or helping.

**Jess Thompson**

Yeah, OK. And you mentioned earlier that Naomi used journaling, EFT, and the STOP process. So let's just break that down a bit for those listening. First of all, the STOP process. Can you explain what this is and why it's such a crucial element of the way that we work?

**Nikkie Foster**

Yeah, so the STOP process is a method of initially learning to listen to our mind chatter, and assess whether it's really helpful for us, or in most cases, actually quite stressful. It's then about being able to proactively update that mind radio, if you like, to one that's more helpful, more facilitative of a calm, safe way of being the world. It's crucially then about spending less attention on that mind chatter and more time in the body.

And this is critical because actually our mind can't think its way to safety, like most of us have learned and most of us try. We have to actually feel safe in our body. And the only way that we can do that is by being in it. So without learning to find safety in our body, we don't shift the system out of maladaptive stress response back into a healthy, adaptive stress response.

## **Jess Thompson - [00:11:37]**

Brilliant, thank you. And EFT, Emotional Freedom Technique.

## **Nikkie Foster**

Yeah, so EFT is also known as tapping. It's an acupuncture tool without the needles, basically. So in clinic, we use it to soothe the fear center of the mind, which is the amygdala, through sending soothing signals, via tapping, by tapping certain points on the body and the face, as well as focusing on the stressful issue itself. What this does, is it allows us to have a combination of soothing signals, plus focusing on the stressful problem, which basically allows us to perceive a stressful problem from a safer, calmer place, thereby clearing the stress from it.

## **Jess Thompson**

Brilliant.

## **Nikkie Foster**

By this point, Naomi, really in her day to day life, was optimizing her rate of healing, through a really solid routine. She loved being with animals, it's really calm and soothing for her. She was doing some light exercise, enjoying doing her coaching sessions, was healthily eating, and doing meditation.

So she had a really good routine for herself. And our sessions became about two things. Firstly, to support her to make the changes to the external life that she knew she wanted. So one was to phase out of the consulting career that she was in, into more life coaching. And the second thing was really to be able to handle family members more effectively, with better boundaries.

And then the second thing was becoming more in touch with her emotional self, firstly in the present, and also then kind of healing past emotional wounds around her childhood, where love had really been conditional on helping and doing. So this is where her achiever and helper boatloads came in.

So the way that we did that, firstly was intellectually unpicking what was going on. We talked a lot about something called the drama triangle, where we can all take up positions of either victim, rescuee and/or perpetrator. You know, we all do this. And it was just something that we were able to kind of map for Naomi.

We also used Byron Katie's, some of her worksheets. So she's got some great worksheets to be able to facilitate changing perspective. And for Naomi, what this did was help unpick her interactions with others, to help her see that she was often actually falling into that rescuer mode. What this did, is it helped her to see these helper beliefs and how they played out in a day to day situations.

So, key beliefs that we picked up, which I suspect many listeners actually will resonate with, were, "if you rely on nobody, nobody can let you down". "Emotions make us vulnerable". And "your emotions are mine to fix".

So these things are super common and often learned really unconsciously and we often don't even realize that they're part of our belief system until we start really examining them.

So our sessions also helped her to see her emotional styles, which for her were intellectualising and somatizing.

Now, emotional styles are effectively the ways that we avoid feeling emotions and instead do something else with them, like thinking about them, or feeling them as symptoms, like in Naomi's case. So part of developing her emotional self was really learning to be with her emotions and let them pass through her. So we used a combination of various tools to help her to understand the symptoms and the sensations of them, to see what messages they were kind of trying to convey.

And we did some EFT with her. She was using and really enjoying sound baths. Donna Eden has a

lovely energy routine that lots of people work with. And really, all of this was about being with her body, hearing its messages, and digesting its messages.

**Jess Thompson - [00:15:32]**

So it sounds as though really working on developing her relationship with herself and her emotions was key to helping her gain a robust recovery. Can you say a bit more about why this is so important?

**Nikkie Foster**

Yeah, of course. So emotions are our primary way that the body communicates what it needs. So, for example, joy tells us what we want more of, sadness often tells us that we've lost something that's important to us, and anger kind of tells us where our boundaries are.

So, of course, if we don't have a good relationship with our emotions, we don't really have a very sustainable relationship with our body. And as a result, we're likely over time to get back into a maladaptively stressed place all over again.

**Jess Thompson**

Absolutely. I think of it like, the emotions are kind of like our compass, and they show us what we like, what we don't like, what is OK, what isn't OK, and what we want more of, and what we want less of.

And so many people try to avoid the uncomfortable emotions, whilst wanting more of those that feel good. And the problem is that you can't selectively numb out from feelings. So if you numb out from sadness, you also numb out from joy.

And it sounds as though supporting Naomi to reconnect into her feelings really opened up the whole spectrum of feelings for her again. Some people, when they first start working with us, are so out of tune with their body's communications, that they don't actually even respond when they're hungry or thirsty or hot or cold. So we have to start at that really basic level of reconnection.

And people also often have a sense or feel that their bodies have let them down with their experience of illness and symptoms, and that they can't trust their body anymore. And we tend to always ask them to flip that around and think about how their body feels about their mind. Does the body trust the mind, does it trust that the mind is going to listen to it and respond to it? And this can be a real light bulb moment for some people. And it sounds as though this was the case for Naomi.

**Nikkie Foster**

Yeah, it definitely was. And I think this comes back to, why looking at symptoms as a healthy response to an overloaded system is so important too, because actually, when clients can really understand that, and when they can start to ask themselves, what is the body's perception of the relationship it's got with the mind, it tells us quite a lot.

And I find it really interesting when clients find this quite hard to get their head around. I was absolutely one of those people too, when I was recovering. Because what it does is it tells me as the clinician so much about where their mind-body relationship really is.

So by this point, recovery was about 95 percent, and the final five percent was really about continuing self care habits that allowed her to stay grounded, in touch with her needs, listening to her body, all the things that are helpful to stay well, not just when life is busy and tough, but actually at all times.

**Jess Thompson**

Absolutely. I think that's a really important point. I know when I was unwell with Chronic Fatigue, I spent a long time just wanting to get back to exactly the life I'd been living before I got ill. So the overachieving, anxious, people-pleasing helper. And it took me a while to really understand that it

was these ways of being that contributed to the illness. And once you realize that something has to change, and start making those internal transformations, the tools and techniques that have helped in recovery become a toolkit for navigating wellness too.

So like you say, they're not just for getting well, they're also for kind of maintaining that robust recovery. Have you found the same for you?

**Nikkie Foster - [00:18:57]**

Oh, yeah, definitely. What initially feels like having to let go of who we are, actually becomes about being so much more of who we are. And I think this is because we get to shed the ways of being that we learned to utilize only really through necessity and then we can live in a way that feels more accurate to who we are today.

So for me, perfectionism as a way of controlling fear, actually turned into a really valuable combination of realism about the present, and optimism about the future. Of course, I was highly reluctant to let go of my perfectionism when I was unwell, but I kind of had, well I did have no idea of how energy draining it was. But now, there's no way anything would be worth giving up and going back to that old method because it just doesn't work.

**Jess Thompson**

Absolutely. Well, thank you so much, Nikkie, for sharing this case with us today. I know that people are going to find it really helpful. And as you say, some of what's going on for Naomi, people listening may be able to resonate with. And hopefully it's given people a sense of the different ways in which we work with people to help them in their recovery journey.

So thanks so much.

**Nikkie Foster**

You're welcome. It's been lovely to chat about it.