

What if tomorrow YOU COULDN'T GET OUT OF BED?

WHEN THAT HAPPENED TO
(HYPER)ACTIVE MAGGIE
ALDERSON, SHE HAD NO
CHOICE BUT TO LEARN TO
RESPECT HER BODY'S LIMITS

PHOTOGRAPHS ALUN CALLENDER



Maggie and
her eight-year-old
daughter, Peggy

It was the day I had to drag half a trolley of shopping over to the customer services in Sainsbury's and say I was really sorry, but I couldn't continue shopping, that I finally took notice of my body's warning signs. I didn't have enough energy to do the family food shop. It was serious.

I don't know how I drove home that day but, once I got there, I hauled myself up the 11 stairs to bed – when you're that knackered, you know exactly how many steps there are – and there I stayed for the next three months. When I wasn't lying on the sofa.

At my lowest ebb, I had to crawl from the bed to the loo and back. With rests along the way. Sometimes accompanied by sobs at what I was reduced to.

I had no idea what had put me in that state, but my GP and acupuncturist both

said I had Post-Viral Fatigue Syndrome. From their descriptions, it sounded like the ongoing exhaustion people are left with after virus-based illnesses, such as glandular fever and shingles.

I haven't had either of those, but the doctor reckoned my condition went back a while – and the acupuncturist reminded me I had been seeing her on and off for four years, with episodes of random exhaustion. So, it must have been some long-forgotten virus that did me in.

Or, I now understand, did I do *myself* in? By not taking that relatively minor flu – or whatever it was – seriously while I had it? By not allowing myself the time to be ill – and certainly not the time to recover. As far as I was concerned, “convalescence” was for wimps and fainting Victorians – all beef tea, air baths and junket.

Because what made my months of bed- and sofa-rest so particularly weird, and so hard for friends and family to understand – they mostly thought I was depressed, I think – is that I'm normally the most active of people. Actually, you could put a “hyper” in there.

My husband used to call me the Duracell bunny. After we'd done a day's work, made dinner, cleared up and put our daughter to bed, he'd lie on the sofa watching telly, or reading, like a normal person.

I'd still be charging up and down the stairs – all 33 of them, not just the 11 from the hall to the bedroom – non-stop, with never-ending little jobs to do. The only time my legs were still was when my fingers were hyperactive on this laptop.

This ceaseless activity is not something I was proud of. It wasn't undertaken in a

spirit of goody-goody overachieving – it was actually fuelled by terror.

Because, deep down, I'm convinced I'm a lazy baggage, and I've always been certain if I let that tendency even get its foot in the door, I would spend the rest of my life lying on the sofa, watching daytime TV. Which is exactly what I ended up doing, of course – although the irony is, it was the hyperactivity that put me there, not the inner slacker I was so afraid of.

But, while I managed to force myself into exactly the situation I have spent my entire adult life (literally) running away from, something odd happened once I got there. I liked it. I really liked it.

As I kept telling anyone who rang (very few came to visit, like it was some kind of plague house), I was having an enforced lie-down and I was, weirdly, loving it.

In the past 20 years, I have hardly watched television. Not out of snobbery, but because sitting still for that long made me too anxious. I wasn't getting anything done! The chaos goblins could be rampaging through the house and I wouldn't know, because I was sitting staring at the telly. Sitting still. That dangerous occupation.

The same mindset made it impossible for me to enjoy holidays. My husband turns into a basking lizard immediately on arrival in a warm climate but, most of the time, I would be getting stressed, planning which activities to take part in – I'd have to do a flow chart – or making lists of which bits of local rubble to visit. When no distractions were available, on a trip to a Florida island gloriously devoid of activities or culture, I spent most of the time doing laundry. Honestly.

Although I didn't realise it at the time, this manic pace, which I thought was just my personality, was in fact a deteriorating condition. In the last couple of years, I had got to the point where even reading magazines and papers made me anxious.

It's something I absolutely have to do for my work, but because it wasn't producing any tangible physical result – a finished newspaper column, another chapter, a tidied desk, a cake – I felt I was wasting time by doing it. By the point of my collapse, I could read a book for just five minutes before



'As far as I was concerned, "convalescence" was for wimps and fainting Victorians'

falling asleep. For a novelist, this is verging on self-sabotage.

So, what did I do with those days of exhausted inertia? There were quite a few when I just lay groaning, the curtains closed, a pillow over my eyes to keep out the daylight. There were times I wept because I couldn't take my daughter to the swings, or dance with her in the kitchen, like we used to, and wondered if I'd ever be able to do those things again. I had melodramatic thoughts about being at her wedding on a stretcher.

Those were the lowest ebbs. The rest of the time I felt a slightly elated relief to be freed from my self-imposed treadmill. The washing needed doing? Whatever.

I wasn't malingering – I really couldn't do anything physical – but on good days, I happily watched the first two series of *Mad Men*, a cultural moment I had entirely missed out on. I also read my way through the pile of dust-covered books on my bedside table and started a blog about them.

There's a revelation! It was only as I wrote that last paragraph I realised that, even in the depths of my illness, I was carrying on in my old vein, which caused it: I've got to use this time productively.

But, while that's true, I was also learning to watch TV and read again. Those were things I truly needed to relearn, and now I'm fully recovered from my knackerment, I'm still doing them. And just for pleasure (although I am still doing the blog).

So, how did I get back on my feet? After hearing

impressive first-person testimonials from three completely unconnected friends-of-friends, and a lot of research on Google, I did a thing called the Lightning Process (lightningprocess.com).

It's controversial (and, costing from £560, it's expensive) but, after three days of coaching, I had learnt how to reprogramme my brain not to be in the permanent state of adrenalin rush that had made me so increasingly manic – and leached my body's reserves in the process.

The technique is simple in itself; there's just a lot to understand about how it operates (and it is based on sound neuroscience, not New Age claptrap). Suffice to say, for me it worked. And very quickly. It's still working, and I now feel better than I did even before

I got ill – and a lot more balanced. And my "artistic temperament" (mardy arse) mood swings have evened out.

Whether it's a result of using that system, or spurred by the fright of the months on my back, I've also learnt to let things go. To accept it if I don't have a vegetable in the house to make sure my daughter has her five-a-day. Once, I'd have driven 20 minutes to get broccoli; now, I shrug and say she can have six tomorrow.

I've learnt to breathe out – and even, from time to time, to sit still. And the next time I get any kind of a virus, I will allow myself a proper old-school convalescence. Because better three days in bed than another three months. ■

JUST TIRED OR SERIOUSLY FATIGUED?

What is Post-Viral Fatigue Syndrome?

'PVFS has many symptoms: lightheadedness, dizziness, fatigue, an alteration in periods, aches and pains in the muscles, numbness and tingling, frequent infections,' says Dr Wendy Denning (thehealthdoctors.co.uk). 'You may also get an alteration of sleep patterns, so you sleep during the day, not at night. Or, you could be sleeping all the time, but still very tired. Some people get Irritable Bowel Syndrome symptoms – bloating and gas. PVFS is not usually considered serious until six months after the original virus,' she says. **So, what can you do about it?** 'What you need to do most is pace yourself,' says Dr Denning. 'The people who get PVFS tend to be busy overachievers. Work out what you can do, and do a little less every day. Magnesium and probiotics supplements can make a difference, too.'