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Fibromyalgia FALLS to Flowers

Conventional medicine considers fibromyalgia incurable, and when Susan Bentley (not her real name) first came to see me, she had endured years of allopathic treatment with little relief from the almost constant pain of this chronic disease. As a Bach Flower Essence Practitioner, I told her that we gently deal with emotional imbalances, not physical ailments, but that I would try to help her use this complementary healing modality to bring emotional relief during her physical distress.

By Alicia Sirkin, B.F.R.P.



Chestnut Bud

Imagine our mutual delight, then, when after using the essences for only a couple of weeks, her physical symptoms began to disappear. On March 19, 1999, Susan heard me speak about the benefits of Bach Flower Essences with biochemist Jay Foster on his talk radio show, 'Health Connections,' in Miami, Florida. She contacted me the same day. Her discomfort was more than she could handle, she told me, and she was willing to try anything that might help.

Susan was a 37-year-old slim, attractive mother of five-year-old twins. But she had trouble enjoying family life because of constant pain and exhaustion. When she arrived at my office, she seemed pleasant and soft-spoken, yet somewhat anxious as she told me that she had had headaches all her life. Susan was also struggling with sleeplessness, depression, nervousness, panic attacks and constant exhaustion, all while trying to raise her family and tend to her parents, who were also living in her household. Pain would wake her two to three times a night. She was taking St. John's Wort for depression.

Along with her health, her personal freedom and family life were deteriorating. 'I was really irritable with my mom and dad for anything, and with the kids. I would get really upset over anything.' Ordinary daily activities like driving caused great distress and pain.

'The tension from the headaches pulled my muscles so much that it was painful to stretch my arms or to turn my head. I would do an aerobics class and get a strong headache. Eventually I stopped exercising completely because I didn't even have the energy to go.' Susan didn't know what was wrong with her. One doctor told her she had tension headaches; another, muscle spasms. Subjecting herself to many tests and treatments, Susan still didn't get a clear answer, or a cure.

Susan described a visit to her primary care physician: 'He put me in a dark room and gave me a shot in the arm. We waited for ten minutes to see if my headache would go away, but I still had it. The doctor told me I'm not suffering from migraines. Then they put iodine in the vein to find out if I had some kind of brain tumor. A CAT scan was negative.'

Her doctor prescribed a type of aspirin with codeine and then Valium. The pain returned. After three days on a higher dose, still in pain, she decided to stop taking the drug because it didn't seem to help. He referred her to an orthopedic physician, who reported a narrowing of the spaces in the cervical spine. But the MRI came back negative for abnormalities. For pain relief and muscle spasms, the doctor performed an infiltration of the spine with pain medication and corticosteroids. Susan didn't like taking the steroid shots. She knew it wasn't a cure. 'With the shots, I felt so scared. I knew he wasn't on the right track.'

Visits to a chiropractor and a massage therapist provided pain relief for only an hour or so. Going from doctor to doctor to try to find a cure, with minimal results, Susan said, 'I felt afraid because I didn't know what was going on with me. I didn't know if the problems were from allergies, or age or my hormone system. I thought it could be my thyroid or too much stress.' When she went back to her primary care physician, he decided she was suffering from fibromyalgia.

Introducing Bach Flower Essences

I explained to Susan that when positive states of mind are restored, the physical body responds-- and sometimes quite dramatically. Troublesome feelings such as fear, frustration, loss, anger, anxiety, sadness, depression and hopelessness often chronically surround a physical illness and hamper healing-- undermining the ability to feel in control of the outcome.

Bach Flower Essences (See Quick Definition) are homeopathically prepared liquids. They work on an energetic level to gently release negative mental and emotional states, thereby strengthening our ability to cope. Additionally, it is not uncommon for clients to report unexpected relief from physical symptoms such as chronic pain, overweight and nervous or addictive habits. As a Bach Flower Essence Practitioner, my first step was to help Susan identify the states of mind contributing to her difficulties in life. Following the approach of Dr. Edward Bach, a British physician who established his new therapy in the 1930s, Bach Flower Essence therapy starts with a client/practitioner dialogue about the client's immediate interests and difficulties. The consultation dialogue process is essential to the correct choice of flowers, since each essence is specific to a particular mental or emotional state of imbalance. Gentle to the psyche, the process has an inherent simplicity. It looks only at what is consciously experienced in the moment. Initial sessions often last an hour, with subsequent visits commonly shorter.



Honeysuckle

QUICK DEFINITION: Bach Flower Essences are homeopathically prepared liquids, sold over the counter in 10 ml 'stock' concentrate bottles that have the ability to gently and safely shift negative states of mind to positive ones.

Peeling the layers of the onion

Ongoing use of the Bach Flower Essences commonly results in 'peeling the layers of the onion.' Layer by layer, as a client's state of mind becomes comfortable, hidden emotional traumas or unresolved issues from the past are gently revealed. Peace of mind is then restored with the appropriate flower essences. In this natural process, longstanding wounds can be healed at the client's pace. One of Dr. Bach's basic premises was to treat the whole person, not the disease.

In the course of one session Susan confided, 'If something really bothers me from the past, I keep it inside. If I don't talk about it, I get the headaches and stress. I feel like it's reflected in my physical body.'

Quite often an individual cannot distinguish, or is not in touch with, specific out-of-balance emotions creating their distress. When this happens, I help clients clearly identify which unwanted emotions, attitudes, thoughts and personality traits are hampering their happiness, success, inner peace and joy of life.



Red Chestnut

As I guide our conversation, I carefully note clients' exact words and phrases, always looking for keywords that will secure indications for specific beneficial flower essences. Some clients feel that they need support for 15 to 20 different emotional states (with varying degrees of intensity) at the same time. When this happens, we begin a prioritization process, leaving out less urgent negative emotional states, arriving at a combination formula of up to six or seven essences. It is a joint effort; I never 'prescribe.'

Each one of us acts and reacts to our ailments in a different way. We may withdraw, or become fearful, angry or resentful. Or perhaps we may feel like a victim, or that we deserve our sickness. The way we react toward illness or difficult life challenges determines the flower essences we choose. For this reason, no two combination formulas are alike for the same illness. We consider the client's personality, rather than their disease. By listening closely, I have learned that each client, on

some level, holds the key to his or her emotional imbalances.

Personalized combination formulas such as these are extremely valuable. Psychotherapists and psychologists who understand the use of essences as an adjunct healing modality refer clients to me for integrative therapy. In this way, the essences afford assistance for advancing the cognitive psychotherapeutic process.

In casting light into the shadows of long-held traumas, a client comes into an area of clarity sometimes for the first time. When taking the Bach Flowers, my clients often report feeling lighter, happier and more at peace than they have in months and sometimes years. And yet, the flowers are so subtle in their effects that some people report after many weeks that they can't feel the essences working at all--until I remind them of how they felt when they first came to see me. Then they realize the difference. In fact, quite often family and friends will notice the changes first.

Selecting Susan's remedies

I asked Susan to describe the greatest challenges she was experiencing. As she discussed unwanted emotional states such as anxiety and depression, I asked, 'Do you know why you are feeling like this?' The dialogue led to the following remedy selection.

Susan explained anxiously that she was planning a vacation trip to visit relatives in South America. At this point, she was already very fragile and dreading the trip. This clearly pointed to the essence 'Olive,' the indication for which is great physical, mental or emotional exhaustion.

Susan wasn't able to say 'no' to her family regarding the trip. She perceived her parents as very strong-willed. Weak-willed in their presence, she had been unable to set boundaries and confront them when necessary to be true to herself and her own needs. After more questioning, I saw that she fit into the caregiver, nurturer personality type--gentle and overanxious to please others. To restore strength to this personality type and help empower her identity, the essence 'Centaury' was strongly indicated.

Susan said she is usually very nervous about the safety and well-being of her family members. It had been a persistent problem. Here, the essence 'Red Chestnut' was indicated, chosen to release the fear that something terrible could happen to loved ones when one imagines the worst-case scenario.



Rock Rose

As there was a whole constellation of fears, we reviewed the other fear essences. Susan told me she has panic attacks when she travels. She always thinks she's in danger without being able to identify the cause. 'Aspen' can be used for sudden panic attacks of unknown origin. To calm her feelings of terror and panic, 'Rock Rose' was indicated to help restore courage and a balanced state of mind. 'Mimulus' for restoring courage when there are known fears was also considered.

In addition, there was a pattern of chronic over-striving for perfection, which contributed greatly to her nervousness. If she planned a trip, it had to be 'perfect.' I could see she was putting a lot of pressure on herself to perform. After my inquiry, she agreed that she is also very strict with herself in her daily routines. 'Rock Water' was chosen for her perfectionism, strict self-discipline and the tension this can create. 'Pine' was also considered because

she blamed herself when she didn't achieve her goals.

Susan said she recently felt depressed due to a setback in her health ('Gentian'). She is impatient ('Impatiens' restores patience) and is occasionally afraid she'll lose control of her mind ('Cherry Plum' re-establishes sanity and control of the mind).

One major complaint was having too many thoughts racing around in her head, which often resulted in sleeplessness ('White Chestnut' quiets the mind). When asked what kinds of persistent thoughts she had, she said, 'I always think about the past.' ('Honeysuckle' puts the past in perspective, releasing emotional triggers and bringing one's focus back to the present). To help Susan change the pattern of her recurrent symptoms, 'Chestnut Bud' was considered to help her learn from her experiences and not repeat mistakes.

Additionally, since childhood, Susan has been plagued by indecision, vacillating between choices, resulting in confusion ('Scleranthus' to help make quick decisions with clarity). The combination formula Rescue Remedy was also indicated due to Susan's major stresses.

From the sixteen single flower essences that were considered, we prioritized seven. We agreed that the most important problems for her to address at the moment would be helped by Centaury, Honeysuckle, White Chestnut, Red Chestnut, Scleranthus, Chestnut Bud and Rescue Remedy, which is a special combination formula of five essences indicated for any kind of trauma, available as a single remedy. Rescue Remedy counts as one essence when combining as many as six or seven essences in a one-ounce treatment bottle for a personal formula



White Chestnut

A Success Story

Susan was faithful to the dosage requirements and her response was quick. In two and a half weeks, when we next spoke, she had almost finished this formula. Little by little the headaches were going away, she felt calm and relaxed, and although she had a little bit of discomfort in the neck, she slept better. This was major progress. She said she hadn't felt the need to return to her physician.

Many sessions later, when recounting her experience, she said, 'When I first saw you I wasn't going to the gym at all, but I really wanted to work out. I wasn't sure if the drops were working. The first time I started working out again, I got such a strong headache that I was afraid that I might faint and crash while driving home. I called my husband for help, but I did make it home. Upon arriving home I put four drops of the formula under my tongue and the headache started to go away in about 15 seconds. By the time my husband arrived 20 minutes later, the headache was gone. That was the first time I realized that the drops worked on me. It was amazing! I felt so wonderful. I held that bottle like a baby. Then I started to take the drops four times a day every day. My husband, who had been skeptical, said, 'If it's really working, don't stop.'

Susan followed a fairly typical process when in a later session she described, 'It gave me hope. Something inside told me that it would work for me. From the first day, I felt different, but I wasn't sure. As the days passed I felt better. But then when that day came at the gym, I knew they were working.'

Susan did take the trip to South America. She said, 'I used to take Valium because I was scared to go on the plane. So I took the Rescue Remedy and I felt really relaxed. I wasn't afraid.'

After three months of treatment, Susan's life had radically changed. She reported feeling better and began taking a yoga class. She said her headaches and the stiff neck were gone. She was no longer taking any painkillers or anti-depressants. She was thrilled to be gaining freedom from her pain. In the past, Susan used tranquilizers to help her sleep. Now, without medication, she reported sleeping better and feeling energetic upon awakening.

'Once in a while I feel some kind of discomfort, like a stiff neck. But now I don't have a bad temper, I don't have headaches, I'm calm, I can drive. I can be out all day with energy. I don't get tired. I feel great. Before, some days I would be in bed all day with a heating pad. I would try to sleep more in the day because I couldn't sleep at night.'

While Susan was taking the essences, she did not institute any new form of therapy or medication. After three months, she said, 'I started to take vitamins and do yoga. I prayed every day. I watch what I eat. I try to avoid things that can give me discomfort or tension and avoid arguments. Or if I feel like I'm going to be in a situation that will turn into an argument, I'll take my drops.'

After four months on Bach Flower Essence therapy, Susan reported doing shoulder stands in yoga class, walking with intermittent jogging three times a week and sleeping through the whole night without pain. She stopped taking St. John's Wort. Her tiredness, dizziness, impatience and depression are gone.

During our fifth consultation session, Susan said she recognized the need to improve her ability to relate in a harmonious way to her family. Due to her excellent progress, three of the original essences were no longer needed, which made room to add three new ones--a classic example of the 'peeling' effect.

Now Susan reports new confidence. 'I don't have any problem with my parents. I care about them, but I don't worry. I feel more harmony, more closeness.'

Susan continues to make improvement. Her fearful state is greatly minimized. Panic attacks are a thing of the past. She now has energy to do the things she enjoys. 'Now I take my life more



Impatiens

easily. I think more about it. I don't worry too much. I don't know how to explain it but I'm happier. A lot more joy. And I'm not afraid--and I was afraid of everything. Now I feel that life is life. No matter what comes, we have to take things easy and not worry about it, to just enjoy life. I'm happier.'

I said to her, "It sounds like your whole attitude about your life and how to live life has changed for the better. Would you say that is true?" She answered, "Oh, yes, 100%"

Resources:

The Dr. Edward Bach Centre in England provides information and referrals to registered practitioners. Mailing address: Mount Vernon, Bakers Lane, Sotwell, Oxon, OX10 0PZ, UK. Tel: 44 (0) 1491 834678; fax: 44 (0) 1491 825022. E-Mail: mail@bachcentre.com; Website: www.bachcentre.com. Bach Flower Essences are trademarks of Bach Flower Remedies Ltd., Oxfordshire, England.

Alicia Sirkin, an internationally published author and speaker, is a leading expert in the field of Bach Flower Essence therapy and one of only a few Bach Foundation Registered Practitioners (B.F.R.P.) in the United States. In addition to presenting seminars, she assists individuals in targeting the essences most effective in alleviating specific factors that may underlie or hamper healing through the use of Bach Flower Essences. Toll-free Tel: 1-888-875-6753; E-mail: alicia@flowerhealing.com; Website: www.flowerhealing.com; Mailing address: P.O. Box 33-0841, Miami, FL 33233-0841.