

The dating game

By Olivia Lakin

On asking my boyfriend what makes a good partner for someone with M.E., he simply replied: 'Me'. When I asked him what he meant, the reply brought a smile to my face.

'I'm lazy, undemanding and even prop you up and feed you when you're really ill'. I would also add that he loves to crash out in front of the television and sleep at least 12 hours a night. Perfect company.

But it's not easy sustaining a relationship when you have M.E. There is also the side of Martin which likes to drink copious amounts of alcohol at the weekend and this rarely fits in with my M.E. lifestyle.

Where to meet Mr or Miss Right?

It's hard to meet 'Mr Darcy' at the best of times, let alone when you're frequently stuck at home and cut off from the outside world. I have met boyfriends through friends, on rare evenings out and even at a tiddlywinks match! Other people have suggested going to house parties where you can sit and talk, or joining a local interest group if you're up to it. Some people find partners through M.E. support groups or internet chat groups, but if trying out the latter, be careful. Always meet in public and ideally take a friend with you.

So when do I mention the 'M' word?

No we're not talking marriage, here! This is the big dilemma that faces all of us, unless you've known the person ages. Mention the M.E. too soon and they might run a mile. Too late, and they'll think you're making up excuses for not seeing them. Someone recommended to say that you have a fatigue illness, and then to slip in the details later on.

If your illness does scare off a prospective or current partner, they weren't worth having anyway. But if

you've known them before you were ill, the chances are they'll still want to stick around. There are a lot of kind, caring people out there who just want someone to love and care for.

Maintaining a relationship

The biggest problem I've found is the unpredictable nature of M.E. One ex-boyfriend said, 'I never knew what was normal. Although I fell in love with the well-ish Olivia, the very ill one was hard to cope with, cause I didn't know what to say or do to make you better.'

You have to trust your partner and open up to them, as if you shut them out you're in danger of pushing them away.

Kerryn agrees. 'When I came down with M.E. it put a lot of pressure on my relationship as I was always exhausted', she remembers. 'However, thanks in part to my specialist, John slowly began to understand the illness more. He still has to pay for everything and we hardly ever go out, but I love him more than ever for standing by me. We try to stay positive and are both looking forward to a better life together as my health (hopefully!) improves in the future.'

Unpredictable? Moi?

I'm always afraid that I'll be a burden, but experience has taught me that most boyfriends actually want to help and don't like to be left in the dark. I always think Martin gets annoyed with me moaning but I know that he gets more exasperated with silence.

At first it was hard asking him to do things for me as I like being self-reliant. But since I couldn't get out of the bath without his help, I've stopped feeling guilty about asking. He says, 'It's not particularly difficult going out with someone with M.E. as you'll do anything if you care enough about them'.

Martin still doesn't bat an eyelid when in the middle of an evening out I ask to go home. Nights out are

frequently messed up though and this can cause problems. It's frustrating for both of us to have to cancel plans at the last minute and although it's not my fault, I end up feeling guilty.

One of the other major difficulties that people have mentioned is when you move in with someone or get married. If you can't work because of illness, then there is a great stress on your partner to bring money in and pay the bills. You may not even be able to cook or do simple house chores and this can cause arguments.

If you're a partner to someone with M.E. you may find it useful to read up on the subject from websites and books or talk to other carers. Don't feel guilty about saying or doing the wrong thing; talk to your partner if you think you aren't handling things well, but make sure that you have 'time out' for yourself too.

Let's talk about sex..

Adults with M.E. frequently have a low sex drive or find it hard to have full intercourse because of the fatigue. This doesn't mean you need to miss out on other forms of sexual contact though.

If you're in a sexual relationship, experiment with touching, kissing, and foreplay. Girls: wear sexy underwear so there is still some excitement even if you can't have sex. Buy some massage oil and get your partner to soothe away all your aches and pains. But never be pressured into anything you don't want or aren't up to doing.

By being tactile, affectionate and paying regular compliments, you can let your partner know how attractive you





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find them, even when you're not well enough to show it physically. Hopefully they will reassure you too. When I'm feeling really zonked I still get a boost from the look of longing in Martin's eyes!

Be inspired...romantic gestures

If you can't get out and about, plan some romantic times around things you can still do together. Have a candlelit dinner at home or even in the bedroom. If walking is hard, maybe your partner can hire a wheelchair for the day to push you round an art gallery – or suggest they take you for a drive or a picnic.

The keys to any successful relationship are communication, honesty and trust. Remember that all relationships have their ups and downs – you can't blame everything on M.E!

You may not be well enough for a relationship yet, and find that maintaining friendships is enough for now. It's true that relationships can bring hassle and that the time has to be right.

But equally, finding a soulmate who worships and adores you has much to recommend it...especially if your partner prefers a quiet life curled up with you to nights out on the town.

If you're under 25, check out AfME's new site for young people at www.a4me.org.uk

Making it work:

For young people with M.E.

- Be assertive and admit when you've got to stop and rest
- Express your feelings to your partner so they don't feel shut out
- Don't hide tiredness in an attempt to 'keep up' with your partner
- Be honest about your limitations but don't put yourself down

Points for Partners

- Have nights out with well friends and time to yourself
- Don't pressure your partner for sex or feel rejected if they're too ill to get physical
- Accept it if they can't go out some nights (or at all!)
- Be a shoulder to cry on, but share your own worries, too



Liv and Martin haven't let M.E. come between them