

Introduction

'It's all in your head!'

'Nothing is wrong with you.'

'It should just settle if you take it easy.'

Have you a bodily symptom that couldn't be explained by doctors? You've told your story (again!), been poked and prodded, gone through medical tests, seen specialists, yet no-one seems to have an answer. You've been told it's all in your head or that you should just take it easy, but that doesn't solve the problem.

And what do you do if the symptoms persist, or they come and go in a frightening manner, or they disrupt your day with their severity? What can help when your symptoms do not fit into a tidy medical diagnosis? Your symptoms are real and can be very disabling, but if no diagnosis has been made, how can you get treatment?

You are trying to live with an undiagnosed illness that has left you feeling frustrated, helpless and alone.

You're not alone. Look around. One person out of every ten you see suffers from similar symptoms.

The commonest condition you have never heard of

You might have pain or weakness. You might even have fits, lose consciousness or be unable to speak. From the passing pain or cough to the devastating collapse, things can happen in our bodies without any detectable disease. These symptoms have been called many things; we are now calling them 'functional'.

Functional symptoms are common. As a doctor with many years of experience, I see them all the time. While one in ten people suffer from these symptoms, up to one in three patients seeing their GP have them! And I have seen functional disorders take many forms, from chronic pain to digestive issues, fatigue and headaches. Mercifully, many resolve quickly. But unfortunately, some can persist even for decades. If they are so common and sometimes so troubling, why is it so hard to get a clear diagnosis? What can be done to resolve these problems? (*Spoiler alert: There is a way to recovery.*)

Let's take a closer look at these symptoms.

Everyone has had an odd symptom that seemed to come out of nowhere. We have all had a pain, a tic in the eyelid or a strange itch that came and went mysteriously. Maybe you nearly wet yourself or even worse? If you have had something weird happening in your body with no explanation, you may have had a 'functional' symptom.

Think of when you suddenly had abdominal pain or a wave of nausea. You didn't have an ongoing diagnosed problem such as an infection but nevertheless your symptom may have been as troublesome as it was unexplained.

Of greater concern are the sudden chest pains or faintness, shortness of breath or even difficulty walking. All these symptoms may be life-threatening or, at least, require urgent medical treatment – unless they are functional. How do you know and what should you do if you get some unexplained change in how your body functions?

This book is for all those who struggle with functional symptoms. You may have experienced these symptoms sporadically throughout your life, or they may have suddenly presented themselves. Regardless of how and when they started, you know they are real.

Why I wrote this book

I have been studying and practising medicine for over 40 years and have seen many people like you, with symptoms that are not explained by any disease pattern.

Like you, I have been looking for answers to these unexplained symptoms and found very little in the standard medical texts and general literature, so I set out to use my research skills. I have been able to find some brilliant individuals, from within the medical profession and from a wide range of healers, all of whom have helped to shape my understanding of these perplexing health problems. This book is the result of a decades-long study.

After completing my degree at the University of Sydney, I practised medicine for a few years before commencing a doctoral degree on an Antarctic research station. On completing my thesis, I went on to study a master's degree in public health, which introduced me to many more ways to understand the causes of illness beyond just physical diseases – including the role of socioeconomic factors, environmental hazards, cultural determinants and psychological elements, which can all lead to changes in health, for better or worse.

When I eventually entered general practice, I found that many of my patients had health problems that were, at least in part, caused by factors beyond simply a medical disease. I have also worked in many different practices and noticed the level of health standards varied enormously depending on privilege. But even within very wealthy areas, such as Eastern Sydney, there remains a level of poor health that cannot be attributed to any physical disease, or environmental or social disadvantage, but nevertheless can have devastating effects on the lives of my patients.

This observation, that illness is not just a product of disease but many other factors, sent me on a search through other forms of health practices.

I was very fortunate to have grown up in a family who, in the 1960s, embraced a healthy lifestyle. So I have a lived experience of the benefits of a healthy diet, daily physical activity and spiritual wellbeing. At six, I thought having a cold shower was a normal part of your day!

Studying medicine, I was surprised to find so little emphasis on health, and I have gone on to learn more about how to enhance human wellbeing and resilience. I have been practising yoga now for 50 years and find its therapeutic benefits invaluable, both personally and for my patients.

I have also studied, practised and taught meditation, and have observed the profound shifts in individuals who embrace meditation in their lives.

Finally, I have learnt to use hypnotherapy and have a deeper understanding of how the subconscious parts of our minds can affect our state. This fascinating journey never ceases to amaze.

Continuing to seek ways to understand the development of functional symptoms, I finally came across the work of Dr Kasia Kozłowska and her colleagues at the Mind-Body Program at Westmead Hospital in Sydney. Her research into the body stress systems has been a vital contribution to our understanding of how the body responds to the infinite number of stresses we experience. Dr Kasia Kozłowska and her team have also worked with authorities from around the world to develop a sound, tried and tested approach to the treatment of functional conditions. While their focus is on children and adolescents, much of their

formulations and approaches can be generalised to the adult population. This book is an attempt to bring her unit's methods to the broader public.

I have also utilised the excellent clinical guidelines on functional somatic symptoms issued by the German Association of Scientific Medical Societies (AWMF). These highly researched guidelines are excellent in that they embrace all bodily systems and are of direct practical use.

By collaborating with experts in the field of functional medicine from around the world, I have worked to develop a clear way to describe what has happened in your body and what to do about it. The research into this new understanding is far from complete and the description given to you here is a simplified version of what the experts in the field are agreeing upon.

But the main source of my understanding has come through the generosity of my patients. In sharing their journey, they have helped me learn what led them to be sick and what aided their recovery. Their (de-identified) stories are used throughout this book to illustrate the role of the body stress systems in causing illness, and how we worked towards their recovery.

How to use this book

Medical science has made extraordinary advances over the last century and can help diagnose conditions with amazing precision, right down to the genetic cause.

But our current medical training generally does not equip us to help you deal with a condition when the history is unclear, examination reveals no concerns, and all tests are normal. You can be sent from doctor to doctor, from test to test, all to no avail. You may be putting up with costly and time-consuming assessments on top of nasty, distressing symptoms, and yet you are no closer to getting relief – until now.

It can be very frustrating to have symptoms that nobody can explain or treat. But the good news is these symptoms are becoming less of a puzzle.

At last, doctors and researchers around the world are finally gaining some understanding of what causes these mysterious symptoms and, better still, how to treat them – and I include these new understandings and findings in this book.

I share with you:

- what you need to know about your symptom and many others
- the factors that come together to cause these symptoms
- how to resolve your symptoms.

I delve into your amazing body stress systems, outlining how they both protect you, but also can become disrupted. In the chapters in part I of this book, I cover the basics of these functional symptoms – including explaining the use of the term 'functional'. In part II, we explore the causes of pain and fatigue much more deeply, and I highlight the importance of the brain–body connection, as well as how modern medicine may be failing you. In part III, we get to the chapters you're likely most interested in, covering the path to recovery, the different ways to restore function, and how you can work through the six steps with your healthcare team to get the care you need.

A word of warning, though – don't be tempted to jump straight to the chapters in part III. You first need to read the earlier chapters to understand the important foundations underlying this treatment approach. Without this understanding, the chapters in part III won't make sense.

I've also included a glossary of terms and other helpful resources in the appendices. And, to help you understand your condition more fully and see you are far from alone, throughout the book I use stories like Madeline's.

'I've got so many things wrong with me, I don't know where to begin,' Madeline gushed as soon as she sat down. She started to list her symptoms and I could see straightaway that this was no ordinary illness: sore throat, rashes, upset gut. Worst of all, her fatigue prevented her from doing her work.

As we tried to sort out the history of each symptom, Madeline struggled to give a clear account. The symptoms were intermittent and seemed not to follow any pattern. She had seen other doctors and had a swag of tests, but nothing could explain her perplexing and debilitating symptoms. What on earth could cause all these problems and yet show no signs of disease in any test?

Madeline's story is unique, but her illness was eventually diagnosed. Over a period, we were able to establish that Madeline's symptoms were functional and, once this was understood and accepted by both her doctor and herself, and the right treatment was commenced, she steadily recovered.

People with health problems like Madeline's often seek to get treated in the same way she did, as if expecting a simple physical diagnosis. She had test after test, but none of them suggested anything was wrong with her. Many people like Madeline have never heard about functional conditions, and it is time that changed.

Some people simply have no explanation for their symptoms and the best we can offer them is recognition and support. Linus is an example of this.

Linus is a delightful, quirky individual who has had a number of interesting medical conditions over the years. These conditions have been diagnosed and treated so he remains extremely well, now doing volunteer work as well as travelling around the country for his job. However, about ten years ago, he developed a pain between his eyes. We checked everything and he has seen a number of specialists over the years, but no-one can solve the mystery. Linus is remarkable in his stoicism, always managing somehow to keep his focus on others. When I ask about the pain, which never leaves him, he simply gives a wry smile and moves on to another subject.

There are thousands of people like Linus, and the medical profession simply has nothing to offer them. This book is for those who, like the other cases throughout this book, can use a model of care that is often effective to treat their symptoms.

In this book, we will uncover the many potential causes of functional symptoms, including biological, nutritional, genetic, epigenetic, psychological, immunological, social, and environmental factors. Together, we will delve into the latest research and break down the key concepts you need to know to better understand your condition.

This book will provide you with the tools you need to understand and manage your functional symptoms effectively. You can gain an understanding of this radical approach and begin to heal yourself. Tried and tested again and again, we now have the means to treat some of the most debilitating symptoms. In one study, simply the explanation of the cause of the symptoms was enough to resolve the symptoms in 27 per cent of the patients!

I hope that you will find these approaches helpful and that, through education, you can be empowered to take control of your health and ultimately improve your quality of life.
So let's begin.