



Taming a Lifetime of Migraines

Tammy Thomas was only 9 years old when the agony first struck. “The pain in my head hit so hard, I thought I was dying,” she says. She dropped to the classroom floor, unable to move. The teacher called her mom, who rushed Tammy to the hospital. One MRI, a CAT scan, and countless blood tests later, the doctor made the diagnosis: migraine.

Throughout the years, Tammy, now 43, has tried dozens, maybe even hundreds, of treatments. But the pain never really subsided. Drugs such as Fioricet and Esgic-Plus would work for a while. Then the pain would return.

An Emotional Toll

Migraines have taken more than just a physical toll. The Fremont, MI, mother of three feels she’s missed out on so much of her kids’ lives. “I’ve had to stay home during sporting events and family get-togethers. My husband had to be both mom and dad so many times,” she says.

Eventually, her marriage could not survive. After 21 years, Tammy and her husband divorced.

Her career was a casualty as well.

For years, Tammy worked as a clerk in a county assessor’s office. But her boss was less than understanding when she called in sick.

“One day he sent an e-mail that read, ‘I don’t care if you have to be brought to work by ambulance, you’d better be here tomorrow!’”

Eventually, Tammy left her job and applied for disability. “I’m not able to tolerate fluorescent lighting or overwhelming scents, so it just got too hard to sit in an office all day,” she says.

Turning Things Around

That’s not to say there haven’t been any bright spots. Tammy has learned several strategies that have been consistently helpful. Biofeedback—a technique that helps you learn to control certain key body functions—has been a lifesaver.

“I learned the technique at the hospital, but I’m able to use it when I’m home, without the machines,” she says. “When I feel a headache coming on, I can get into the zone and reduce the pain.”

Self-hypnosis using a CD has worked as well. “It starts with helping me relax the muscles in my toes all the way up to the top of my head,” she says.

Tammy also avoids triggers, such as cigarette smoke and artificial sweeteners. She’s found some medications that really help as well, including clonazepam, trazodone, and duloxetine. Even when a severe migraine breaks through, a cocktail of hydromorphone, ketorolac, diphenhydramine and ondansetron, works miracles. (Some of the heavy-duty drugs can be addictive, so Tammy’s family doctor works closely with her to limit and control the prescriptions.) Things are looking up in her family life as well. She’s engaged to a man whom she describes as kind, patient, and caring.

Living with migraines has been a lifelong battle—but Tammy is confident she’ll win the war. ▲