

# Emotions matter when illness hits

BY SHERYL UBELACKER

They may not share the same physical symptoms, but for many people with a chronic illness, the psychological reaction following diagnosis is remarkably similar.

Anger. Frustration. Helplessness. Depression.

And while the medical system does its best to deal with physical aspects of chronic diseases, providing emotional support is another thing altogether, experts say.

"Millions of Canadians suffer from these diseases and they suffer emotionally as well as physically," says Dr. Julie Righter, a Toronto psychotherapist.

For Gael Hepworth, being told she had multiple sclerosis in 2004 set off a cascade of emotions she felt ill-equipped to deal with.

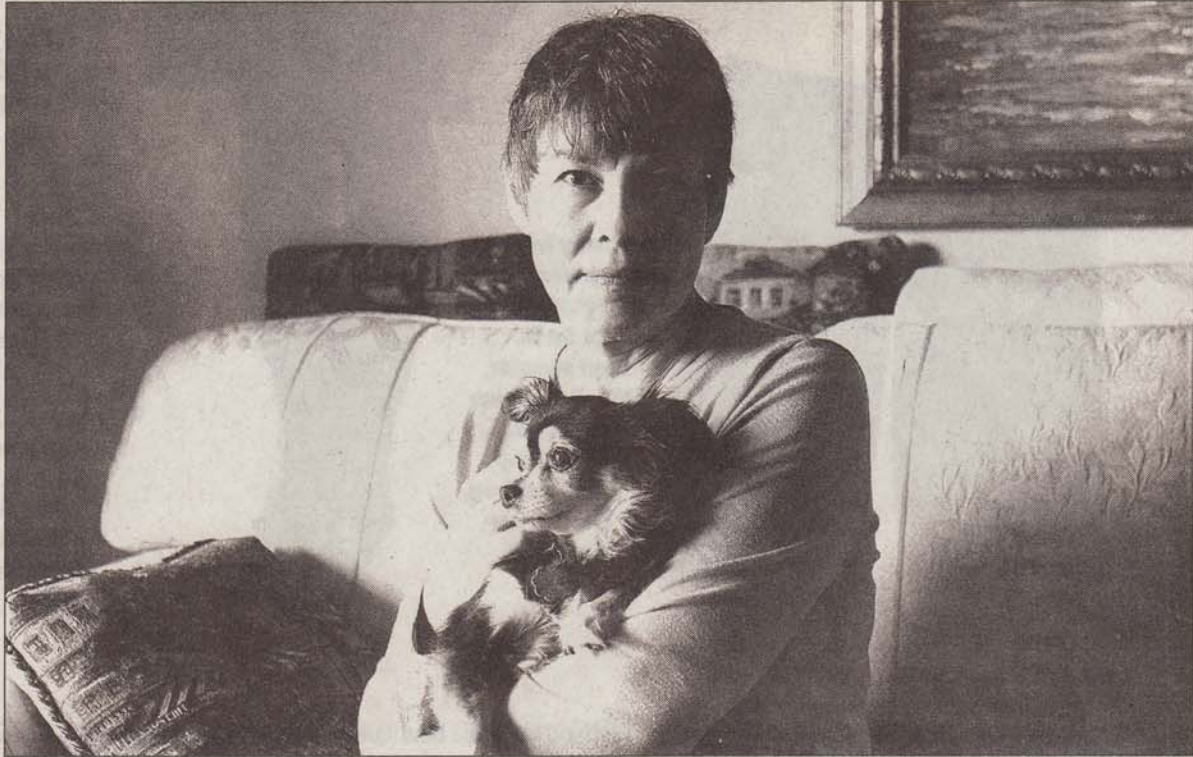
"I was just completely devastated," says Hepworth, who knew people with the progressive neurological disorder and knew what she might face in the future. "So it was just total and complete terror."

The fatigue and other symptoms associated with the illness would sap her strength to the point where she had to quit working. Her illness put a strain on her marriage and family life, as she was unable to take part in activities she once relished.

"You're blindsided by the fact that you got taken off the good train and put on a different course — and that course is like bobsledding without any safety equipment."

The next blow came with the death of her father, and further incapacitation when she fell and shattered the bones in one arm.

"I was in just such a dark place ... I was dealing with an illness that you're thinking you're not going to be in a wheelchair, you're going to be lying in an old-age home and somebody's going to have to change your diapers and come in



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**Gael Hepworth was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2004: 'It was just total and complete terror.'**

and feed you," she says, admitting she contemplated suicide.

It was not until she was referred to Righter that she saw any light at the end of that long tunnel.

In the past year, Hepworth has been attending weekly group sessions, called Life's Beat, for people with chronic illnesses, a group she describes as "the warriors of the worst-case scenarios. She really does teach you how to manage yourself, in that you're not beating yourself up, that you're your own champion," Hepworth says.

Not surprisingly, notes Righter, about 80 per cent of people diagnosed with a chronic illness develop depression. "The divorce rate doubles, their relationships are slowly but almost surely destroyed. They often can't work, not because

of the illness but due to depression.

"Unfortunately, the fear of stigma keeps many patients silent. If a patient does speak up, it is hard to find the right help," she says, stressing that there is a critical need in Canada for more psychotherapy programs specifically designed for people with chronic illness.

Righter says what she offers isn't high-tech: She teaches patients that their emotions are valid and should be fully experienced, not suppressed. She has them set goals to change what they can. And she gives them communication tools to lessen emotion-fraught interactions with spouses and other family members, who often have their own set of psychological issues arising from the illness.

"Most of them, it has never oc-

curred to them that it is painful to watch somebody you love suffer and not be able to take that away."

Deborah Radcliffe-Branch, an educational psychologist at Montreal's McGill University, agrees many people with chronic diseases feel they've been cast adrift by the medical community when it comes to emotional support.

She directs a program called My Tool Box, a six-week self-management program for those with conditions such as MS, chronic pain, lupus and hepatitis.

Radcliffe-Branch warns that as Canada's population ages, "we know there's a huge tsunami of chronic illness heading our way, and we can't handle it."

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