

I used to sleep for three hours every afternoon and was back in bed by 9.30pm – that was my life

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"Although I had a fantastic support network, sometimes other people, with the best will in the world, would say: 'Do you think that maybe if you just got out there, went back to uni, got a job, things might be all right?' I used to absolutely bawl my eyes out because I was just so upset," admits Mel.

"The counselling really helped a lot. It helped me to learn to accept a little life of sitting on the beach and, in the later years of my illness, I wasn't so angry and upset about it; I was much more accepting and didn't think about it being my life sentence any more."

A bubbly, confident teenager before her ME, the illness, for which currently there is no "cure", caused Mel to become withdrawn and she was prescribed anti-depressants. "I only took them for a few months because I didn't like the side effects, and ultimately I've never been a depressed person," she says. "I've only ever been a happy person who became very unhappy because of circumstances. I was only sad because I couldn't be out living life, it wasn't because life sucked."

From time to time, Mel would try to see her old friends and put a brave face on her illness, but admits that it didn't always help. "I would ask people what they have been up to and they would just say: 'Oh nothing much, just work'

and it would make me so angry that people had their health and they weren't using it. I wanted to be doing everything: going on trips, going to parties, doing my part-time job and the degree that I had loved, but I couldn't and it felt really unfair."

Having spent more than a decade trying various

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conventional treatments, including numerous painkillers as well as alternative therapies, Mel had begun to accept she might never get better.

"Everybody that I met seemed to know someone that had ME, it's remarkably common," says Mel. "I'd always ask: 'Did they get well?' and the answer was always no."

But two years ago Mel was introduced to a training programme called the Lightning Process, which has completely transformed her life.

Created by Phil Parker, a therapist in personal



ACTION GIRL: Mel is back to full strength and fitness – as shown the sporty shots below
Main pictures: David Johnson 642682/84

development, the three-day programme is designed to ease chronic health issues, such as ME, by retraining the brain to change negative thought and behaviour patterns. A holistic programme, it aims to show people the power of the interaction between mind and body and how unconscious thought and behaviour patterns can be altered and changed to create very different outcomes.

"I had a friend in New Zealand who had ME at the same time as me," explains Mel. "A friend of hers had read an article about the Lightning Process and told her about it and my friend came all the way over to England for one week to do the course."

"When she got home she called me up and told me she had all her health back and felt completely better. I got straight on the internet, read all about it, found a practitioner and I was over here in a month."

Mel's family, who are originally from England, were coming over to attend her cousin's wedding so were able to include the programme in the trip. She completed the programme in London, which at the time was only available in the UK and a couple of other countries, in June 2008. The process is now practised in 13 countries.

"Day one of the course was a six-hour day and at the end of the day I went back to where we were staying in London and instead of having my usual afternoon sleep, I went out to dinner with my family and then to see *Phantom of the Opera*," remembers Mel.

"I could never have imagined being able to do all that, so even after day one I was starting to improve."

"The week after the course finished was the best week of my life. I felt so good, I think when you're sick for so long you forget what it's like to be healthy."

Desperate to make up for lost time, and with her health fully restored, Mel decided to remain based in the UK and just a week after completing the course began a trip travelling across Europe.

"I went to 13 countries, all the way from Albania to Morocco," beams Mel. "I went camel trekking, hiking; I slept under the stars and went sailing around the Greek Islands. I couldn't believe how well I felt, my friends and family were delighted."

So, inspired by her experience, Mel decided to train to become a Lightning Process practitioner herself, and now teaches the course part time, as well as having a full-time job.

"The whole time I was ill I always said that whatever got me better I would become involved in," she says.

The Lightning Process is not without its critics. Some experts have stated that, by focusing on behavioural therapy, it effectively treats ME as a psychological, rather than a physical illness. Others have questioned the cost of the course, while both ME Research UK and the UK Association of Young People with ME have cautioned against "unproven" treatments where there is no clinical or research data available.

"The process may not work for everyone," admits Mel. "You have to use the process – you don't get well just by turning up to the course. But it's not hard to use and you don't have to use it for the rest of your life."

"If I hadn't tried the process I would probably still be lying on the couch. I'm so grateful to my friend for telling me about the programme. I spent 10 years worrying about how I was ever going to get my life back, and now I have it."



Mel will be holding a free seminar about ME and the Lightning Process on Tuesday, May 4 at Milton Community Centre, at 7pm. Booking is essential – call 07505 675806 or book online at www.processforfreedom.com. All attendees will receive a £40 voucher towards the course.