

Women, get alive – the iron code

Reading sample

It's all too much for me. I'm only 32 and my batteries are run down, I just feel like sleeping all the time. I often feel depressed for no reason at all and my self-esteem is at rock bottom. I can't cope with the children, they get on my nerves permanently, the whole family is affected and I'm at the end of my tether. I am so sorry, I wish it were different. I've stopped sleeping properly at night, which makes me feel even worse the next day, and there are even days on which I am unable to work at all. I hope I don't lose my job. My boss keeps asking me what's wrong. What should I tell him?

Whatever has happened? Only a few months ago things were quite different. In the morning I would make the breakfast and, after an invigorating shower, I would take the children to school before going to work myself. I coped easily with the 50% workload, I enjoyed my work. After lunch I did the housework, then went jogging and in the evening I felt fresh and ready for family life. What could have happened?

My marriage is good, I get on well with my husband, the children are doing well and don't cause us any worry. I enjoy my work, the pay is right and I have good friends.

My visit to the doctor was frustrating. After a thorough physical exam and blood tests he was pleased to announce that I was healthy. No organ damage, no anaemia, no thyroid deficiency or anything else. Good. But still, I would have preferred him to find something that was making me ill. I become plagued by self-doubts and feel totally helpless, where will this lead? The doctor prescribes me antidepressants which I start taking reluctantly. I'm afraid and I don't understand the world any more. Why have I become a head case in just six months? I had a happy childhood, so that can hardly be the source of my problems. Maybe I should quit my job? When I go jogging I now practically collapse after five minutes so I give it up. When things are no better after a few good nights' sleep and a week off work my family becomes even more concerned. I've lost all my self-confidence. And I'm not interested in sex any more, which my husband finds it hard to understand.

Has the doctor missed something? Is there something wrong with my head? Isn't it time I had an X-ray? After seeing a second doctor who gives me the same good news that I am physically healthy and after a head X-ray and brain tracing (EEG) which show that there is nothing wrong with my brain, I ask the doctor what is causing my suffering. And at last I get a straight answer. I'm suffering from physical and mental exhaustion. That's the diagnosis. I've taken on too much. Children and a job are simply not compatible, and so on. I feel stupid as I'm already perfectly familiar with this diagnosis myself and experience it day in day out. I AM in a state of physical and mental exhaustion, but why? Other women have children and a job – and they're fine.

So there's only one thing left: willpower. I force myself to go on living as though there were nothing wrong. My will persuades my leaden body to get up in the morning, not to go to sleep at the wheel and not to appear downcast at work. But after a few weeks I realise that I'm on the wrong track. Now I'm suffering from tense neck and shoulder muscles and headaches on top of my original symptoms. I often feel dizzy and have to hold on to the desk to stop myself from falling. Good lord, now I really am ill. The doctor will make a diagnosis at last and be able to help me. With my hope kindled I go to my family doctor. But to my dismay the only diagnosis he gives me is that my neck muscles are tense. Still, that's something. He prescribes me physiotherapy. After nine sessions my pain hasn't got any less. I'm close to despair and often burst into tears. My family become more and more concerned.

And then the turning point

Today I know the cause of my suffering. I can hardly believe how quickly I got better and how simple the treatment was. All that was needed was the right diagnosis and the right treatment. The third doctor I eventually consulted told me I had too little iron in my body even though, according to conventional medicine, my blood levels were normal. He gave me a course of four infusions over two weeks and I was fighting fit again.

Looking back, I have every reason to be angry at the first doctors I went to. I did not feel they had taken me seriously, I think it was a cheek to brand me as a head case and give me antidepressants instead of the iron my body needed. I know I'm not a car, but that's what I feel like. A car with a full tank. Before the doctor filled up my iron stores with infusions my tank was empty and the car wouldn't go any more. I felt miserable and life was passing me by – and this went on for almost a year. How must all those women feel who've been given the wrong treatment for years? After all, if a car's tank is empty you don't give it antidepressants, you fill up the tank. Or is there something

I haven't understood? Why did the first doctors give me pills for my head instead of fuel? Is conventional medicine under a huge misapprehension about this problem? Has conventional medicine overlooked the fact that women lose iron with their menstrual periods? Why has no one noticed before that the body's iron stores aren't unlimited? After all, as a woman I lose blood for five years of my life all in all. I'm gradually beginning to understand. Conventional medicine must be mistaken. It hasn't understood the problem yet.

Since then, other women I know have told me they are suffering from problems and symptoms similar to those I had in the early phase. I sent them all to the doctor. He diagnosed empty iron stores in the body and immediately gave them the infusions they needed. I feel happy that I have done a good deed. They were soon back to normal and, like me, will make sure they don't get into a similar state again.

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