

# ONLINE BONUS: Q&A PERSPECTIVE ON INTEGRATIVE TREATMENT



In the spring 2006 issue of the *CFIDS Chronicle*, Jonathan Gilbert—one of the founders of The Gilbert Clinic—shared his philosophy on treating CFS with a blended approach of Chinese, naturopathic, psychotherapeutic and western (allopathic) medicine.

Since interest by Association members was the driving force behind the *Chronicle's* invitation to Gilbert, we invited some Association members and friends to share their firsthand experiences with his herbal therapy.

*The Gilbert Clinic (TGC) is a Washington, D.C.-based practice that provides an integrative program for the care of those with CFS and fibromyalgia (FM). The program distills the clinical experience of its three founding team members, who have a combined history of 27 years working with CFS and FM: Janine Blackman, MD, PhD; licensed clinical psychotherapist Anita Bains, APRN, BC; and Jonathan Gilbert, an NCCAOM-certified practitioner of Chinese herbal medicine and acupuncture.*

*Deborah Sapiurka, Elly Brosius and Aaron Finch have each been under Gilbert's care for some period of time. Recently, they answered basic questions about their experience with the herbal and therapeutic elements of Gilbert's treatment protocol. Though The Gilbert Clinic has recently formalized their protocol to more systematically integrate various forms of medicine, the majority of Sapiurka's, Brosius' and Finch's familiarity is with the herbal portion of treatment. Here are the answers they shared:*

## What commitment does the herbal protocol require?

**DS:** My treatment lasted 14 months. For the first few months, I probably saw Gilbert monthly and the visits lasted about 30 to 45 minutes. The rest of the visits were about six weeks apart. During this time, I took herbs daily unless I was instructed to stop for a period.

**EB:** Keeping all appointments my first year was especially important because my skin, nails, eyes and more were transforming quickly in response to the herbs and inner work.

**AF:** I saw Gilbert about every other month while taking the herbal regiment. The main commitment is cooking the herbs (in my case) every week. I also had to be proactive in ordering the next batch of herbs before the current one ran out.

## Can you briefly describe what goes into acquiring, preparing and administering the herbs?

**DS:** Most of the herbs are powders that are mixed with hot water to make a tea. One set of herbs was a packet of dried roots and spices that needed to be boiled down three times in order to prepare a "juice" that lasted about 3 days.

**EB:** My formulas have almost all been mixtures of 11 to 17 powdered herbs, prepared and mailed by Gilbert, usually with the instruction, "Take 1 teaspoon in warm water, 30-90 minutes after meals." Sometimes I was advised to start at a low dose, reduce a dose, or take time off between different formulas. The flavors are strong, but I drink them straight.

**AF:** I received the herbs in the mail and had to cook them through a boiling and straining process that took about an hour. I did this once a week, and then drank the resulting herbal juice every day. It might be difficult to do if you travel often, however.

## If you have participated in the "integrative" part of Gilbert's practice (incorporating therapeutic support and traditional medical monitoring), could you briefly describe that experience, from a patient's perspective?

**DS:** I did not get therapeutic support. I saw Janine Blackman (the western physician) twice at the end of my course of treatment for a general health assessment.

**EB:** Over time, I created my own team of what is now at TGC. I visited my open-minded and encouraging internist regularly. During the first few office visits with Gilbert, he gently mentioned a day would come when therapy might be a benefit to treatment. Since I had done therapy when I first was ill, and I did hours and hours of work on myself, I gave him the old "I've done that work" line. Four months into treatment, I felt what he meant. The herbs had awakened some of my old symptoms, but also gave me a new way of coping and working with symptoms and accompanying emotions. So, I then willingly went for 17 months of weekly therapeutic support with a CFIDS knowledgeable pastoral counselor. It was invaluable to talk with someone familiar with this kind of healing.

**AF:** I saw a psychiatrist (M.D.) associate of JG's who helped me get off of the numerous prescription medications I was on for 6 years. I'd say that Gilbert helped heal my body but the doctor helped get me off of the anti-depressants that I was on.

### **How long did it take for you to start feeling the effects of treatment?**

**DS:** I recall that it was a slow steady progress. Often, symptoms disappeared without me noticing them. I recall Gilbert asking about my headaches halfway through my treatment and realizing I hadn't had any in a few weeks.

**EB:** When I started, I wasn't comfortable driving very much. After eight months, I started driving myself the 29 miles to the herbal consultations. At 18 months, I drove a 60-mile roadtrip. Now I drive regularly.

**AF:** I didn't experience a dramatic, rapid improvement in health or energy. It was more of a gradual, steady climb, with getting off of all antidepressants as the major sign that I had really come a long way.

### **What has been the most beneficial aspect of this program for you?**

**DS:** After seven years of illness, I am now a healthy, fully functional human being. I shop, cook, travel and exercise. In a few weeks I will be going back to work part-time. The most beneficial aspect of this program for me is a return to health.

**EB:** I feel less "sick" most of the time, and I am more cognitively and emotionally consistent and secure. I rarely overreact to normal or strong stimuli anymore, and I can eat most of the foods I had given up so strictly. I laugh longer and more freely. I am also functioning well without many of the prescription I used to take.

**AF:** Without a doubt, the biggest benefit has been getting off of the prescriptions I was on. A rheumatologist had prescribed them in large doses and then kind of washed his hands of treating me after a while. Other doctors I saw were shocked at the prescription levels, but trying to reduce them was problematic. My pain would go up, and my sleep would suffer. The herbal program, without a doubt, helped me to get healthy enough to stop taking the drugs and to sleep without medication.

### **What has been the biggest drawback or most challenging aspect of this program for you?**

**DS:** The most challenging aspect of my recovery was coming off of my sleeping medications (a combination of Klonopin and Elavil). It was a weaning process that took a few months. I now sleep 6-8 hours a night without medication.

**EB:** It's challenging for me because of how long it is taking and how some body symptoms get more "present" for a

short time as I work on mind, soul and emotional components associated with them.

From more than 20 years of severe illness and stress—the last 14 of them on disability—many imbalances formed within me. I have multiple diagnoses. Even one of the herbal formulas pushed me to express a rare condition Gilbert recognized, and my treatment had to change direction. On difficult days, I focus on the profound changes so far.

**AF:** The biggest challenge is holding out hope that I will feel as good as I did before ever getting CFS. I got it in 1998, at the age of 28. I have continued to work full time all the way through, but it has been a real struggle. I used to have enormous amounts of energy (to work a full day, then go for a 5 mile run). Since this treatment I am much healthier. I can think more clearly, sleep better and exercise more. But I still feel tired as compared to before CFS. So, in a single sentence, the biggest drawback is that significant improvement is a wonderful thing, but it's still not a cure in the purest sense.

### **Are you still on other medication for your symptoms? What has been the most challenging aspect of CFS from which to find relief through this program?**

**DS:** The only medication I take at this point is a low dose of thyroid medication. Gilbert warned me that it is very difficult to come off of thyroid medication once you've been on it for awhile. I tried to wean myself off of it, but I wasn't successful.

**EB:** I no longer use the six prescription medications or any nutritional supplements, yet I maintain a greater sense of wellness and better functioning. I was taking roughly 60 pills a day in 5 doses, and now I take only small doses of nonprescription allergy medication.

**AF:** I am tapering off of the last prescription my doctor switched me to in order to go off of the old drugs. As I mentioned earlier, the most challenging aspect is realizing that getting away from the more severe brain-fog, muscle-aches and insomnia is indeed a major improvement, but it is not the same thing as feeling energized like I did before CFS. Maybe someday.

### **Put yourself in the position of a reader just hearing about the Gilbert Clinic for the first time. What would you most want to know from someone who's actually been involved in the treatment?**

**DS:** I suspect that someone hearing about The Gilbert Clinic for the first time would question the credibility of a bona fide treatment for CFS. They would most want to know, very simply, if it works. Based on my experience, the answer is "yes."

I imagine the reader might ask me next, "How do you know you're cured?" I would respond that since there is no

medical proof that someone has CFS, there can be no medical proof that one doesn't. I only know this: I was very sick for a very long time. I no longer feel sick, and I no longer consider myself to be suffering from a debilitating disease.

**EB:** I'd expect them to ask what surprised me about the treatment. The list of surprises is long. I learned that mind-body-soul medicine is strong. I discovered that

healing involves going with the flow just as much (if not more) as it does active participation. I found that I had to create room in my mind that long lasting healing from CFS is possible. And these were just a few of the things I discovered.

I was also surprised to learn that this particular form of herbal medicine is rare and requires a 12 year apprenticeship in chronic illness.

**AF:** I'm sure the first questions would be "Is this guy a quack?" The answer is "No." The second question might be, "Is it hard to make and take the herbs?" Again, "No. It's rather like making a very elaborate tea concoction once per week and then drinking some of it every day."

The last two questions would be: "Are you 100% cured?" My answer? "No, not 100%. But I wasn't expecting 100% recovery." And finally, "Is it worth it?" "Yes."

### Editor's Note

The Gilbert Clinic treats CFS as a state of being that must be healed rather than a disease that must be fought. Says Gilbert, "We do this by applying holistic principles, seeing the condition not only in terms of a physical complaint, but also in the context of the whole of the person's life."

The clinic's new structured protocol requires a synthesis of treatment modalities. It is a 12-month (minimum) program, during which time a multidisciplinary team of practitioners spends a substantial amount of time with the patient, creating a highly customized form of treatment and sometimes enlisting outside specialists. As such, the overall cost of the yearlong program can be expensive. Unfortunately, this treatment isn't covered by traditional insurance. However, the comprehensive nature of the program is centered around a patient healing and moving on, rather than experiencing a lifetime of visits.

Gilbert's original article, "A Perspective on Integrative Treatment," appeared in the spring 2006 issue of the *CFIDS Chronicle* (Volume 19, Issue 2).

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