

# Bouncing back...

She suffered from chronic fatigue for the longest time without realising it, before coming face-to-face with it. Jan DeCourtney waged her battle against disautonomia through the magic of self-help and has shared it with the world in her award-winning website and book... **By Roma Sur**



Jan DeCourtney, after two decades of perseverance against disautonomia, is a happy and successful person today

For 20 years, Jan DeCourtney dragged herself through life. She felt perpetually low, inching along as the days went by. Jan suffered from chronic fatigue that resembled post-traumatic stress. Even if she did nothing, just going through the day was an uphill task for her!

## Fighting a daily battle

A bright student in school, Jan was alarmed when she began to fall asleep in her classes almost every day. When she started working at the front desk of a publishing company, things were no different. She couldn't get through a full day at work. She couldn't go to restaurants or sit through movies. She was a social outcast. 'It was an internal war that wouldn't end,' Jan remembers, shuddering.

Waking up at three every morning and not being able to go back to sleep became a daily routine for her. The following day she would be a mess and go to work like a lifeless sack. By her own admission, Jan says that she could never stop crying and didn't know why!

## A quest for recovery

Things only got worse with time and Jan's life started falling to pieces. She went to countless doctors who made a lengthy list of her symptoms but couldn't diagnose the problem. Most of them dismissed her symptoms as figments of her imagination. These

professionals began to "blame the patient" and desperately tried to foist her off to a psychiatrist.

After several visits to the doctor, Jan was diagnosed with subclinical disautonomia, a rare medical condition in which the nervous system does not function properly, and happens because of prolonged exposure to stress, sugar, pollution and chemicals. Usually the condition is recognised only when the patient is in extreme situations. But Jan's condition was subliminal – one that simmered in her mind underneath her tired body year after year.

## The cloud's silver lining

Jan could not afford expensive doctors bills, since she did not have health insurance. Her family in Illinois was also steeped in problems, so she didn't want to burden them with her health issues. Jan was at the lowest point in her life – chronically fatigued, lonely and poor. But she was determined to overcome her condition and go back to living a healthy life, no matter how long it took her. She started researching extensively about disautonomia, during which she stumbled upon Dr Walt Stoll's website in 2001. This discovery opened up a whole new world for her.

In Dr Stoll's own words, 'Jan embodies the kind of courage and persistence it takes for an individual to never give up in the face of a health problem that is beyond cure – even with the current standards of the disease-care system!' He continues, 'I designed my website to disseminate amongst my patients my work of 30 years. I had just retired from active practice and was writing my first book. The website was designed to be free to all.' Jan intuitively gauged that the website could change her life and was able to recognise the comprehensive diagnostic and therapeutic programme that Dr Stoll had developed

over years through practise, learning and persistence. The simplicity of this knowledge and healing lies in "seeing the forest instead of the trees". This philosophy worked so well for her that Jan was moved to share her experience with others. She coined the term "3-Legged Stool" to describe the curative inputs that finally worked for her: Skilled relaxation, aerobic exercise and a whole foods diet.

## Mission... possible!

Jan immersed herself in this new-found 3-Legged Stool theory. She started walking for 10 minutes every single day of the week. She threw refined foods out of her life. And she completely gave up sugar. Within months of self-treatment, she started seeing results. 'My body felt liberated from a straight-jacket,' she recalls. Exercise increased her energy levels and psychotherapy helped her redis-

cover her self-esteem. It took her three years to "cleanse" her body. 'It was like cleaning your house and getting rid of all the toxic elements,' Jan says, explaining how her new lifestyle had worked for her.

## Leading a happy life

After coming back to life, Jan started the foundation that is forwarding Dr Stoll's vision and trying to reach out to patients across the globe, who suffer from disautonomia or other related nervous disorders. 'She is not only a healthy person now, but a human dynamo who has far surpassed my abilities. She is somebody every teacher covets – the student who surpasses the teacher,' gushes Dr Stoll.

Jan is in her fifties today, but healthier than ever. 'The biggest difference is that I feel alive,' she says. She is a certified massage therapist now and manages a highly successful website and wafts through 10-hour long days with ease. Her website has won four awards. In 2008, she co-authored a

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book titled *Recapture Your Health* on her disautonomia experience and the 3-Legged Stool theory.

A person bursting with positive energy, she strongly believes that there's a healthier person inside each one of us, and that we have to take small steps to find that self. Jan lost 20 years of her life to chronic fatigue. Those years also took away her chance to start a family or mother a child. But Jan says that she does not have the time to mull over her past. She is busy fulfilling her plans for the future – writing a cookbook for people with disautonomia. While we talk to her, she discloses with a coy smile, 'A guy asked me out this afternoon,' and gets ready to take on another busy day.

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'I drew strength from my belief that there's a purpose to everything in life. My illness was there for a reason,' says Jan when asked what gave her the courage to regulate her lifestyle, given the dismal state of her nerves.

Jan's hard work and determination started yielding results. She started noticing startling changes in her life – earlier she couldn't sit through a short church choir song, but she could now endure an entire night of service. Jan picked up her life from where she had left off. She went

Photograph courtesy, Jan DeCourtney