

IN SICKNESS

EMILY ACKERMAN tells
Claire Brine about living
with long-term illness

EMILY ACKERMAN was juggling her career as a doctor with her roles as a wife and a mother to two young children when she developed myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME). Almost overnight, the rug was pulled from under her feet.

‘I was one of those people who ran around from morning till night, cheerfully complaining that there weren’t enough hours in the day,’ says Emily, who lives in Edinburgh. ‘Then there was a period when the whole family got flu. Gradually, everyone got better – except me. My flu-like symptoms remained for a year.’

Emily went to the doctor, who sent her for blood tests. They came back clear. Over the next five months, Emily wondered if she was being a hypochondriac. But then she was told she had ME. She was 29.

My precious dreams for life were gone for ever

‘Nobody knows much about ME, but it’s a virus that assaults every cell in your body,’ she explains. ‘I had neurological problems, poor balance, fatigue, brain fog, slurred speech, digestive difficulties, muscle pain, swollen joints and high fever. During my worst times, I couldn’t tolerate light: I had to lie in bed with the curtains closed and my eyes shut all day and night. Eleven years into my illness, I couldn’t leave the house without using a wheelchair.’

‘Just as my illness affected every cell inside my body, so its outward effects changed everything in my life. I had to give up work and start allowing others to look after me, rather than the other way round. Losing my identity and independence hit me hard. My self-esteem was squished flat. I knew that my precious dreams for life were gone for ever.’

As Emily’s body suffered, so her emotions went into overdrive. She felt vulnerable, sad, frustrated, guilty and a failure. She directed her anger at God.

‘I wrote complaint letters to God in my head, pointing

AND IN HEALTH



Emily Ackerman

out that, despite a binding written contract saying that he would love and support me for ever, he had turned his back on me. I remember lying in bed, accusing God of wasting my life. I found it difficult to understand why God didn't heal me, if he could.'

As the months and years went by, Emily's approach towards her illness altered. Instead of asking God why he had 'done this' to her, she began asking him to help her move on.

'I realised that I couldn't keep living in the past,' she says.

Despite suffering near-constant pain and times of depression, on the days Emily felt well enough, she turned her hand to writing. The result of her efforts is the book *The Amazing Technicolour Pyjama Therapy*. It includes her experiences of being ill (plus the stories of others), provides advice on how to manage relationships, work, faith and feelings while battling life-changing infirmities, and offers questions and inspirational quotations for quiet reflection. It also explores the Old

E ***My illness has taught me that I am valued and loved***

Testament story of Joseph and how the setbacks he faced took him in a new and unexpected direction.

'When I was lying in bed, thinking that nothing was happening, God was preparing me to write a book to bring hope to others,' Emily says. 'As I was writing – and asking myself what had got me through the toughest times – I began to realise just how much God had done for me and what he was still giving me.'

'My illness has taught me that I am valued and loved, beyond what I can or can't do for others. I've learnt that it's OK not to be in control all the time. I have also begun to be more confident in my faith. God has proved to me that, despite my crying and grumps, he will never leave me – and I have begun to trust that more.'

After 23 years of illness, Emily made a full recovery last year. She believes God healed her.

'In nine weeks, I went from using my wheelchair to jumping about in a Zumba class,' she says. 'I'm writing about it in my next book.'

As Emily throws herself into a new chapter of life, prepared to embrace whatever it may bring, she is grateful for her good health. But she also clings to the lessons she learnt through her illness. She is keen to continue encouraging others who suffer.

'I would say to them: "Well done for not giving up." No matter how bad ill people might feel, God has plans to bless, equip and encourage those who ask him. Our illnesses don't take him by surprise, and I believe he has our growth in mind, even through the darkest times. He is waiting to provide for us and will be by our side, whatever happens.'

● ***The Amazing Technicolour Pyjama Therapy* by Emily Ackerman is published by Muddy Pearl**

