Cures for Women

The Rest Cure, developed by Dr. S. Weir Mitchell in the 1880s, was the standard prescription for neurasthenic women. The Rest Cure mandated a retreat into the home and withdrawal from domestic and social responsibilities. Those with the worst cases were prescribed complete bed rest for six to eight weeks in dim rooms with only soothing activities, sometimes excluding books or substantive conversations.

Undisturbed seclusion from children, family members, and friends combined with a quiet lifestyle helped restore frayed nerves. Uplifting literature and light exercise were also recommended. Women were believed to be particularly sensitive to the draining effects of strenuous mental effort, the dangers from which the Rest Cure protected them. In their quiet homes and gardens, relieved of social and domestic pressures, they could replenish the nervous energy depleted by the modern world and too much mental activity.

The treatment for women gradually came more in line with that for men. By the early 1900s, physically able women were also prescribed vigorous exercise in natural areas away from the city. Later, they were also encouraged to read and discuss serious books if they were intellectually inclined. The Rest Cure, however, continued to be the prevalent treatment model for neurasthenic women.

Cures for Men

Men suffering from neurasthenia were prescribed vigorous, even strenuous exercise in natural areas away from the pernicious influences of modern life. They were ordered to travel to remote areas, such as cattle ranches of the American West or the European Alps, and undertake rugged, outdoor living. Laborious treks through the western plains of the Dakotas or in the Rocky Mountains would replenish men’s nervous energy.

Not all men diagnosed with neurasthenia were able to travel to remote wilderness in search of respite. In time, rugged camps emerged, such as the Muldoon Hygienic Institute in western Pennsylvania, where men could recuperate for a few weeks or months, free of business and familial pressures. Rigorous exercise regimens in gyms or in the outdoors bolstered their recovery. The Maine woods and the Adirondack Mountains also became popular locations to fish, hunt, and ride in the pursuit of a cure.

If they were too weak for exercise, men in collapse from nervous exhaustion were sometimes prescribed the Rest Cure—complete withdrawal from the demands of social and business life. Once they regained their strength, they too were directed to undertake as much vigorous exercise as their health allowed.

This chart from *American Nervousness, With Its Causes and Consequences* by George M. Beard (1880) illustrates the progression of symptoms that were attributed to neurasthenia.