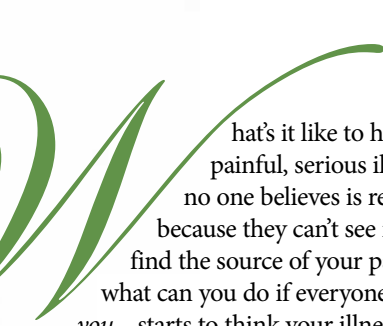




How AJ Langer
triumphs over
fibromyalgia—an
often-misunderstood
illness

My So-Called illness

Photo by Bader Howar



What's it like to have a painful, serious illness that no one believes is real just because they can't see it—or find the source of your pain? And what can you do if everyone—even *you*—starts to think your illness is all in your head, despite what your body is telling you?

For actress AJ Langer, the answer was to endure the pain. Until, that is, medicine caught up with her disease.

AJ (as she is called by family, friends, and co-workers) lived a charmed life—if you discount the pain—long before she married the Earl of Devon in 2004 and added the royal title of Lady to her name. She began acting during adolescence and starred in several television shows, including the hit teen drama “My So-Called Life” and the sitcom “My Three Sisters.”

But when the red light atop the camera went dim, AJ's spirits often did, too. Why? “I was always in pain,” she says, “in my muscles, my joints, all over my body.” The kind of pain AJ speaks of is caused by *fibromyalgia*, a syndrome that for a long time was a mystery to doctors. It is now revealing itself for what it is—an autoimmune disorder that affects some 10 million Americans, most of them women.

Fibromyalgia causes chronic pain

and stiffness throughout the body, but it doesn't cause inflammation, which is one of the reasons it has been hard to pin down. Before doctors gained a better understanding of the illness, they couldn't find any reason for patients' symptoms, and, as a result, couldn't offer treatment. People simply had to live with the pain.

A rough-and-tumble tomboy

Growing up, AJ was one of these people. Born Allison Joy Langer in

Columbus, Ohio, to parents Deana and Gary, she and her family moved to California when she was 5. As a child, she was a rough-and-tumble tomboy who idolized her athletic big brother, Kirk, and played on an

all-boys Little League team—the boys actually dubbed her “AJ.”

Since getting bruised and banged up was part of “playing hard,” both AJ and her parents blamed her childhood aches and pains on sports. AJ notes that her mother had also suffered with aches and pains all her life—and was later diagnosed with fibromyalgia. But at the time, there were no answers. Plus, adds AJ, “my mom was used to living in pain, and she never let it stop her.”

In fact, Deana Langer lived by a very matter-of-fact rule of thumb. “You've got to press on no matter

At 34, Lady Langer-Courtenay is living what she describes as a full, happy, and pretty magical life.

what, regardless of how you feel,” recalls AJ. “So that’s what I did.” Pressing on despite pain became a way of life for her. But there were times when ignoring discomfort was impossible. “I missed a lot of school because of stomach pain and irritable bowel symptoms,” she recalls. “I also had joint and pressure-point pain and high fevers.”

One day, while sliding into home plate on a squeeze play, AJ’s hip went out. That, she notes, was the first time her still-undiagnosed fibromyalgia actually sidelined her from sports.

Her response? She turned her attention to performing on the stage. “I was always intrigued by acting,” she says, “and one of my high school teachers gave me the push I needed and helped me get signed with an agent.”

So, at age 15, she began acting. Six years later, just as her career began to take off, AJ’s fibromyalgia kicked in hard. For a year, she suffered from nearly constant pain, fever, and stomach troubles. Despite her problems, she didn’t skip a beat. “In six years,” she recalls, “I never missed a taping or appearance because of fibromyalgia.”

Finally, on the set of “My Three Sisters” in 2002, her illness flared so severely that she had to skip a taping. After that, balancing her health problems and her work became increasingly difficult. “Three months into a new project, something in me would start breaking down,” she says. “I’d start run-

FIBROMYALGIA: An Energy Crisis

“Fibromyalgia is a ‘physical energy crisis,’” says Jacob E. Teitelbaum, MD, medical director of the Fibromyalgia and Fatigue Centers in Annapolis, Md. “Your body spends more energy than it has,” he explains, “and when muscles are low in energy, they get stuck in the shortened position and hurt.” That chronic discomfort, he adds, causes the brain to amplify the pain, making it worse and worse.

Just as there are many ways to blow a fuse, there are many stresses that trigger a physical energy crisis. Some common triggers include:

Inadequate sleep

Hormonal and/or nutritional deficiencies

Infections Sinus, yeast, and bowel infections are common in those with fibromyalgia.

Injuries Although whiplash is one of the most common, any injury that disrupts sleep can trigger fibromyalgia.

Chronic stress Ongoing stress (financial, marital, etc.) that keeps you up at night can trigger fibromyalgia.

ning high fevers from an infection—I even had surgery for back pain.”

Relief: Rx and beyond

Throughout this time, AJ’s doctors prescribed various medications, some of which provided a measure of relief. But

she also explored some out-of-the-box strategies. On a trip to Costa Rica, AJ found what became her favorite alternative therapy: surfing. “Being in the water is calming and soothing for my pain,” she says.


Regular acupuncture and massage sessions, along with meditation and breathing exercises also help. “Breathing and meditation help me focus on mind over matter,” she says. Today, AJ finds relief by combining medication prescribed by her doctor and alternative treatment—but her search for alternative treatments began in 2002.

That same year, while vacationing in Las Vegas, AJ found something—or someone—nearly as good as any treatment: Lord Charles Peregrine Courtenay. They were staying at the same hotel, met, and hit it off. Two years later, Charles proposed while they were surfing off the coast of Los Angeles. In 2005, they married, and on Jan. 31, 2007, AJ gave birth to a daughter, Joscelyn Skye Courtenay.

There is a chance that Joscelyn Skye could develop fibromyalgia, too. Experts say that about half of those with the illness have an affected family member. “It’s my biggest nightmare,” AJ admits. However, she notes, “I don’t want fibromyalgia to define her—or me.” And if Joscelyn does show any symptoms, she says, AJ will know what to do this time around.

For now, Lady Langer-Courtenay

is, at 34, living what she describes as “a full, happy, and pretty magical life.” Splitting her time between Los Angeles and the English countryside, she and her family are planning to one day move into her husband’s 14th-century family home, Powderham Castle in Devon, and assume their roles as royalty.

In many ways, it’s a real fairy-tale ending. And for AJ, who enjoys life—pain or no pain—it’s a dream come true. 

—Gina Roberts-Grey



AJ and
Joscelyn Skye