The Path to Accepting Rheumatoid Arthritis

by ANNA SCANLON

What Happens After Diagnosis

Accepting a diagnosis of rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is no easy task, particularly if you have enjoyed a very healthy and active life prior to hearing the news.

For some people, getting the diagnosis might actually be a relief after years of mystery symptoms and baffled doctors. To others, it might feel like a devastating blow. Remember, no two cases of RA are the same, so it is important to take that into account when accepting the disease.

Don’t Compare Yourself to Others

No two people with RA are the same, therefore comparing yourself to someone else with the disease can either leave you frustrated that you can’t perform at the same level they can, or scare you into thinking you’re going to be completely disabled for life. The degree in which RA affects people runs the gamut, from people who barely seem to struggle with symptoms and are largely able to carry on with life, to those whose lives have changed drastically since before their diagnosis.

Instead of looking at what someone else with RA is doing, focus instead on yourself and managing your symptoms. Having RA may mean that you may have to give up certain things you used to love, but you also may be able to work with your symptoms to do the same things with the aid of medication or at an alternative pace. Your journey is yours and yours alone.

Allow Space to Be Angry and Grieve

Anger and grief upon being diagnosed is totally normal. However, it may not come on all at once. Just like coping with the death of a loved one, each person handles the acceptance of their disease in their own way. You may feel fine after being diagnosed, only to find yourself six months later angry and frustrated at your disease. Be patient with yourself and ask for others to do the same.

In order to deal with your anger and grief, keep a journal or diary where you can safely write down your feelings and frustrations. It also helps tremendously to have a friend to speak to, even if the person doesn’t know what it is like to have RA first hand.

One very helpful exercise in dealing with anger and grief, particularly over the things you can no longer do, is to write down the things you can still do or talents unexplored. Perhaps you have a talent for painting or writing you never got to develop due to focusing on other areas in your life.

Your life may not go according to the way you mapped it out now that you have RA, but give yourself space and time to grow in this new direction. Although it may be difficult, list all of the ways that RA may be an opportunity for you to try new things instead of limiting you.

Seek Out Friends with RA

Keeping in mind that each case of RA is different, they all share similarities. As such, it is important to develop not only a network of family and friends who support you no matter what, but also of others who have RA.

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While their journey and symptoms may not be identical to yours, they can give you tips and tricks for dealing with RA specific issues and can be a great support when dealing with friends and family who don't "get" what it means to have an invisible illness.

Many hospitals with a rheumatology department host such support groups. If there isn't one directly at the hospital, they may also know of one near by and may be able to refer you. If this isn't the case, a simple search online will reveal a whole host of RA support groups where you can chat with others on the Internet.

While this may seem impersonal to most, you might find that you can share some pretty intimidate details with others without feeling embarrassed or judged. This can lead to some pretty intense friendships that may carry on off the Internet as well.

Seek Therapy

Most people see a therapist or counsellor when they are diagnosed with a terminal illness, and getting an RA diagnosis should be no different in that respect. Although RA is typically not an illness that will kill you, it may potentially mean the death of the life you had before.

Seeing a therapist or counselor, even on a temporary basis, can really help you digest your emotions and learn coping skills specific to your case and your personality. There are even therapists that specialize in dealing with people who have chronic illnesses, so this is a fantastic way to try and come to grips with what you're going through. It may not be easy, but it is a constructive way of processing your emotions.

Let Your Doctor Know If You Experience Depression or Anxiety

Depression and anxiety can be a normal part of accepting that you are living with a disease that will never go away. However, you need to keep your rheumatologist and/or counselor up to date if you begin to feel desperate or unable to cope.

You may be eligible to go on anti-depressants or anti-anxiety medication for a period of time in order to ease the symptoms and make the situation much more emotionally tolerable.

Start Thinking About a Plan B

For some people, a diagnosis of RA means they may have to rearrange their plans and goals. This doesn't mean you will have to completely give up on everything you're aiming for in life, but it may mean you will have to rearrange some things.

This may mean putting in flexible hours at work, seeking alternative employment or simply slowing down in general. It may be worth it to speak to a counselor or career coach to discuss your options so your workload doesn't suddenly become massively overwhelming.

The most important aspect of accepting your diagnosis is seeking support. No one should deal with this life changing news alone and it can feel quite impossible to deal with that. Instead, lean on others as much as possible while learning to navigate the disease and empower yourself.