Pursuing Your Dreams Despite Chronic Illness

by LANA BARHUM

Pursuing Dreams With Chronic Illness

As you are learning and trying to cope with rheumatoid arthritis (RA), its many symptoms, complications and limitations, it may seem as if it is swallowing up your dreams and leaving you with little control of your life. But you do have some control. One of the most vital parts of pursuing dreams with chronic illness is finding purpose even when it seems unattainable.

After all, we all need purpose to still do what matters, what makes us feel good and what gives us meaning. We all need a reason to get out of bed every morning or else illness will destroy us and lead to anxiety, depression and other problems with coping.

Life Changes

In nine years of living with RA, my life has drastically changed and it has not been the same since. After all, RA brings about new treatments with a host of side effects, doctor visits, sick days and struggling to manage your career, changes in your relationships and frustrations from dealing with all these things. It is a lot for anyone to handle, including me. And it has, over the years, taken its toll on my emotional and mental health.

People with chronic illnesses, like RA, are at a higher risk for depression. In fact, up to 42% of people with RA live with major depressive disorder according to one report in the International Journal of Clinical Rheumatology.

Dreams Are Still Possible

There is no magic formula or secret to success — with or without chronic illness. Just take a look at all the remarkable accomplishments of people just like you who are living their dreams, despite illnesses, such as RA, or diabetes, or fibromyalgia and/or living with chronic pain.

Some dreamers with chronic illness are even famous names. Kathleen Turner (rheumatoid arthritis), Selena Gomez (lupus), George Clooney (chronic pain), Jim Carey (depression), Jack Osborne (multiple sclerosis), Phil Mickelson (psoriatic arthritis) and Venus Williams (Sjögren's syndrome) — just to name a few.

My experience has been that even though dreams need to be put on hold or perhaps modified, they can still be reality through acceptance of your situation, some tweaks, hard work and perseverance.

Acknowledging Your Life Has Changed

Being diagnosed with RA is scary and it changes your life, but it does not mean you do not have a future. It means that you have to decide whether being chronically ill will destroy that future or change your situation for the better.

To make this experience positive, start by accepting and appreciating the present. Stop dwelling on what you have little control over and focus on being more than your illness.

There is no denying my life has changed because of RA, but I still can advocate for myself, eat healthy, keep moving and take care of myself and my loved ones. If I focus on these things, there is nothing to stop me from dreaming big and making my dreams a reality.

Manage Expectations

Your confidence often has a lot to do with what you expect for yourself and what you allow others to expect from you. Living with chronic illness redefines what those expectations are and changes life's rules. If you make the mistake of not changing expectations, you only set yourself up for failure.

Before I got sick, I had a full schedule, which included my children's school activities, a stressful legal job, jumping every time someone asked for help and trying to get into law school. RA forced me to prioritize what mattered most, which is my health and my children.

Now I spend more time at home, have fewer visitors, work a less stressful job and I do not jump at every opportunity to help. My expectations have changed. Now, I get to place my attention on what is most important, which includes my dreams and my children's dreams.

Adjusting Your Dreams

Your dreams may have seemed much more attainable before RA. Maybe you wanted to travel world, get a big promotion or get married and have kids, or in my case, attend law school and be a successful attorney.

Then, RA came along and made you question whether you should just give up. But even if you have to give up on some dreams or adjust them, you do not have to stop reaching for the stars simply because you are sick.

When I got sick, I knew I could not be working full-time, attending law school, spending time with my children and being sick. So, I changed my plans and got a master's degree instead, focused on my current career in a less stressful environment and pursued my long-time dream to write.

It Doesn't Have to Be Perfect

Life has not been perfect since the day my doctor diagnosed me and most days are challenging. But I do not expect this journey or experience to be perfect.

To be honest, I am scared. It has not been easy – far from it – and I do not expect it to get easier. But my dreams and passions, they are a blessing amongst all this chaos. They allow me to escape and focus on something besides being sick. They give me hope and they give me reasons to keep going.

I refuse to let RA and fibromyalgia keep me from reaching for my dreams, pursuing my passions and setting goals. Just because RA, or another chronic disease, seems to dominate your life, it does not mean you cannot have dreams and set goals for what you want in life – physical, personal, professional, or emotional.

I promise you – if you believe, pursuing dreams with chronic illness is not just possible, it is so important! You have got this!