How Chronic Illness Changes Friendships

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Friendships and Rheumatoid Arthritis

I used to enjoy having people over, going out, helping out friends and loved ones when asked, and getting involved in school functions at my kids' school. That was before I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) nearly nine years ago.

And from that day forward, my relationships were significantly transformed. Mostly because I came to the realization I was physically unable to do more than work a full-time job and care for my two young children.

Socializing also became nearly impossible as my health declined. While I didn't know it at the time, this experience turned out to be a blessing a disguise. The circumstance of being sick showed me what true friends look like and that there wasn't any room in my life for anything less.

When Friends Walk Away

There were friends who never made a huge effort to be a part of my life previously and my being sick just made me see them for who they were. When my health failed me, they, too failed me.

They stopped coming over or even picking up the phone to ask how I was doing. It was a painful process of losing people and those losses lasted for several years.

The sicker I got, the more people I lost but I also chose to end some friendships.

Some of the friendships I ended were with people I wasn't close with in the first place. Another reason I ended some friendships was because I was seeing my life in a whole different way.

I was too busy trying to create a calm and positive home life for my children while focusing on my health. I didn't have room in my life for people who only showed when it suited them or who judged me because my home wasn't as clean as it used to be or I was too tired to help them out.

Ending Some Friendships

You cannot sacrifice your health to preserve unhealthy friendships and no one should expect that from you.

End relationships with these types of friends:

- Friends who treat you as a dumping ground for their issues but never pick up the phone to call you otherwise;
- Friends that bring drama and try to pull you into it;
- Friends who only show when they need something or when it is convenient for them;

- Friends who don’t put as much effort as you do in the friendship;
- Friends who stopped calling and caring since you got sick; and
- Friends who stopped inviting you because you declined previously due to a bad health day or because they feel you are not fun to be around anymore.

While it can be painful to end relationships, doing so is usually best for both your physical and mental health. Besides RA leaves you with little control so take control by deciding who you want in your life and who you don’t.

Value the Friends Who Stick Around

Not everyone walks away. Some people actually stick around so remember to appreciate those people.

Treasure the friends who pick up the phone and check in when they haven’t heard from you in a while. The ones that still invite you, still show up, bring food over, or just sit on your couch and keep you company and make you smile and feel less alone.

Good friends do exist and they are out there. But it takes good people to stick around and be a real friends to someone who is sick often and who doesn’t always have much to offer in return.

It’s Okay to Make New Friends

There were people who surprised me in ways I didn’t expect. They didn’t stop calling; instead, they turned on me by judging and criticizing me for what I had little control over.

When those friendships ended, I wondered if I was alone in what I was experiencing. I started talking to others living with RA who similarly experienced losses and found I wasn’t alone.

Even when you find yourself attacked by people you thought would be there, take heart in knowing you are not alone. There are people out there who will accept you as you are – RA and all – and are real and true friends.

Just don’t let the fear of getting hurt again hold you back from making new friends. Be open to meeting new people and reaching out to others who understand your limitations, struggles, fears, and concerns.

Be Your Own Best Friend

When all else fails and people bail you, you can still give yourself all the support and validation you want from others.

Encourage yourself to engage in healthy habits, including sleeping well, and staying focused on your treatments. Invest in your emotional health by seeking support from a therapist who can help you identify challenges and learn coping skills.

And when you feel like you need to talk and there isn’t anyone around, grab a pen or head to your computer, and write it down. Get in touch with yourself, listen to your inner voice, and choose to become stronger as a result of your experiences.

A Blessing in Disguise

I eventually learned all I could about RA and became an advocate for myself and others. I have shared my story – not just to reach out to others but also so that I could learn to cope and heal during times I feel overwhelmed, tired, and as if I don’t have any fight left in me.

I have established many new friendships based on my battle with RA, shared and sought advice, and cried alone and with others. In some weird way, RA has been a blessing in disguise.

But it hasn’t been easy and there are plenty of days where I have wanted to give up. The support of so many and the belief in myself has allowed to be to see how wonderful this journey has been and continues to be.