Ignoring RA and Moving Forward Because You Have To

by LANA BARHUM

Tips for Ignoring RA and Moving Forward

I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis (RA) at age 32 and I was a young mother who thought I had everything in my life going as planned, but RA changed every single one of those plans.

For the past ten years, I have disclosed to few people that I have rheumatoid arthritis, and I have my reasons. Mostly because chronic illness and pain aren't things people want to talk about, and because I want people to believe my life is as normal as theirs is.

I have been blessed because having RA doesn't keep me from working, supporting my family and raising my children, but lately, my condition seems to be changing, even worsening. Despite that, I continue to look for silver linings and blessings even when it seems the truth about my RA and pain is right in front of me.

Coping With RA

Learning to cope with pain is a process, but I have many years of experience. Even so, I have my moments where the pain makes me angry at the world and forces me to lash out at the people I love most.

While my loved ones know I don't mean to take my pain out on them, they don't understand what it takes to ignore the effect this disease has on my life. Sometimes, I move forward because I have to, not necessarily because I want to.

Most days, I wake up in pain and go to bed in pain. I cannot begin to explain with specificity the kind of toll this takes on a person mentally, physically and emotionally, as the words tend to escape me just thinking about this.

I Get That Others Don't Get It

While it seems as if I am alone, I know others who live RA pain understand my frustrations. And I cannot speak for them about how pain affects their lives, but I can share with how it affects me in my little corner of the world.

But when I share with people who don't understand, I find that they don't quite get what I am saying. I often wonder if they think chronically ill people are all brave, handle their suffering in inspiring ways, and always keep a positive outlook.

In some ways, this misguided thinking is the norm – not just from others, but from those of us living with RA. After all, the biggest lie I tell myself is if I can still do everything I need to do, I can be normal, or even appear as normal as everyone else.

Maybe, I am just trying to be honest with myself about my emotions and experience. RA can get you down, and you must decide whether you will let it walk all over you or whether you will keep moving forward, even if you

don’t necessarily want to.

Even When You Don’t Want To

I have never viewed my ability to look forward as an indication RA was winning or running the show. And yes, sometimes it adds up, but in the end, the fact that I keep moving forward – for my children, to pay bills, to succeed and even find love and happiness – is an indicator – at least, from my perspective. I am succeeding.

I keep moving forward even when it feels like I have nothing left in me, and I might fumble or fall along the way. Sometimes, I even invent scenarios in my mind that I am a superwoman who barely notices the weight of the world on my shoulders.

You might think I am misleading myself or not seeing the truth in front of me, but that isn’t the case. My interpretation of my life is raw and truthful, and no one knows that reality better than I do, but my life also doesn’t offer many options or alternatives.

If this applies to you, you know where I am coming from. When people ask me how I keep going when RA is such a debilitating disease, I keep the answer simple, “single mom, two jobs, two kids, and little support.”

It does not mean living with RA is easier for me than someone else. It just means I am doing the best I can with what this disease and life has handed me, and that may mean ignoring the effect this disease has me and moving forward because I have to, even when I don’t want to.

RA is Not Without Lessons

I could choose to walk around sharing what being afflicted with RA is like, but I know firsthand people dance around conservations about chronic pain and invisible illness. That is the first lesson we learn about living with RA – that it is a personal battle no one wants to talk about.

Every single day, there is a new lesson to be gained and, I promise there are more good ones than bad ones. By accepting my life as it is – RA and all – I give myself permission to learn from these experiences and rise despite the setbacks.

A therapist might tell you this isn’t way to go, but going on ten years, I am finding this is what most people do. After all, this is a personal journey, and you are entitled to live it on your terms and in ways that fit in your life and work best for you whether others agree or not.

There was a time when RA brought so much anger to my life – anger at myself, at my doctors, at people who didn’t understand and even at the universe because I perceived there was unfairness. But anger doesn’t help, and when you realize this, you make a conscious choice to accept the role RA will play and welcome it as just another part of your extraordinary life.

RA makes you less afraid because fear isn’t going to help you. Fear used to dominate how I handled this experience, but the lack of it frees me to pull up my bootstraps and live my life, experience by experience, setback by setback, and day by day.

I Don’t Ignore Me

I don’t want anyone to think moving forward despite RA means I don’t take care of myself because I do. RA has forced me into making healthy choices that make it easier to live my crazy, chaotic life.

I sleep and eat well, I don’t drink alcohol or smoke, I try not to overwhelm myself, and I continually look for balance. I take pride in what I have achieved despite RA and how I continue to prevail despite every obstacle put in front of me.

And yes, there have been times where I have wanted to give up, but I keep going – not because I want to, but because I must. At the end of the day, RA is only one part of my life and, while I don't ignore my health or take my health for granted, I realize it is not the most important part.

Doctors don't have all the answers and medications aren't always effective. The biggest predictor of my success with this experience is me and how I choose to manage all of this.

I Am Not Beaten

Some days with RA are harder than others, but I refuse to let RA beat me. And whether I like it or not, RA has made me a stronger person.

We are all fighters, and we can keep fighting, moving forward, and just living our best lives even on the days it seems there is nothing left in us to keep moving.

By choosing to put one foot in front of the other, even when it takes everything I have got, I don't miss out on my life. And it may not be the way others deal, or in opposition of what the professionals advise, but this works for me, and I am happy – happier than I have been in a very long time.