

Life as a 20-Something



The Elevator Pitch: How to Quickly Explain Your Disease

By Ilana Jacqueline

THERE HAVE BEEN far too many embarrassing moments in my life when I've had to introduce myself and then my disease in the same breath. Quickly summing up primary immunodeficiency disease (let alone the other illnesses I've been diagnosed with) in one breath would take some Olympic lungs that I just don't have. That's where the "elevator pitch" comes in. There are so many situations in your 20s where you'll need to use an elevator pitch to describe your disease. Between job interviews, first dates, new friends, even professors who will need to get the SparkNotes version of your disease in between classes, an elevator pitch may end up being one of your greatest tools when it comes to advocating for your needs.

Here are some tips on perfecting your pitch quickly, accurately and without getting that blank stare in return:

Ask before you explain. It's rare, but sometimes people have actually heard of your disease and don't even need to hear your spiel. So, before breaking into song and dance, preface your pitch by saying: "I have a disease called primary immune deficiency. Are you familiar with it?" This statement actually accomplishes two things: It verifies whether someone knows what your disease is, and it gives them the option of asking for more information if they don't.

Don't get too technical. Instead of focusing on the pathology of your

disease, focus more on how the disease affects you as a person. You may want to say that because of this disease, you're more susceptible to infection, so you might have to be more cautious than the average person. You may also want to say that your body doesn't produce the natural defenses against infection, so you have to have medication to replace it. Or, that some days, you feel completely normal and can function just like everyone else, and some days, you feel like you got hit by a train.

Use analogies. Relate your disease to something the person will understand. This can be altered when you're speaking to children, adults and even doctors who are unfamiliar with your condition. People with Crohn's disease might say something like: "Living with Crohn's is like carrying around a ticking time bomb. One wrong bite could set off a painful stomach ache that can knock me out for the rest of the day or week." I've heard others describe immune disorders as "being the only one casually walking through a war zone every day without any armor on — and then people are shocked and confused when you get a few bullet holes in your chest."

Mention what it doesn't affect. Don't forget to tell inquiring minds what you still can do — despite your disease. Mention if you can still work, go to school, go out for a few hours a day, or see and communicate with

your friends online or over the phone. This helps to remove yourself from the pity equation and includes them in some of these parts of your life.

Keep it short, and shut it down.

The whole point of an elevator pitch is to avoid long-winded (and often depressing) conversation about your disease. So, keep your explanation short and to the point: This is what I have, this is how it works, now let's go get some tacos. A good way to bring the conversation to a screeching halt is to say something like: "It's kind of complicated, but I hope that explained some of it. You can always Google it later if you want to get a better idea of what it is."

Remember that the way you discuss your disease is the way others will interpret it. If you give a humorless, depressing description of your disease, you'll inevitably bum your audience out. So, don't be afraid to have fun with it. For instance, you could finish your speech by gently grasping their shoulder and saying: "...and it's highly, highly contagious."

Just kidding! ■

ILANA JACQUELINE is a 23-year-old dysautonomia and primary immune deficiency disease patient from South Florida. She's been writing professionally since 2004 on everything from health and wellness to celebrities and beauty. Her blog www.letsfeelbetter.com is both a personal collection of anecdotes about life with chronic illness, as well as a resource for patients of all ages.