

IG Living's Fourth Annual Essay Contest: Winning Entry!

"If I had a chance to live illness-free for 72 hours, I..." This was the leading sentence we asked *IG Living* readers to finish when writing their entries for our fourth annual essay contest. These words sparked entrants to share heartwarming and inspirational stories about their personal journeys of living with a chronic illness. From dozens of entries, the first-, second- and third-place winners were chosen. Featured here is the winning entry. The second- and third-place winners essays will be published on IG Living's blog in August at www.IGLiving.com/blogengine.

Living Well with Chronic Illness

By Michelle Turk, NP



IF I HAD a chance to live illness-free for 72 hours, I would not change a thing about my life. With that said, I admit I did imagine myself running along my favorite cliff path poised above the beach with complete abandon. In my mind's eye, it was a liberating run without regard for my weak and numb legs. But, after daydreaming for a few minutes, I realized what a beautiful life I have designed around the demarcations of my disease, encompassing all things unknown. Within this intertwined realm of sickness and health, I have rewritten the landscape of suffering and honed the art of living well with chronic illness.

We all arrived at being patients in different ways, but our collective disease states can serve as a springboard to transform our lives, to sharpen our minds and to live with intention. It becomes an opportunity to re-examine and refocus our perspective so that we can live our best lives without apology or regret. Although our chronic illnesses will likely remain a permanent part of us, it's not the whole story.

As we embark on our journey, we can choose to rewrite our story from that of a victim of disease, to that of a survivor — one that prevails in the face of adversity and passes on a legacy of hope. The art of living well is not achieved by mere chance or by default, but simply by design. Empowering ourselves to be the artist who carefully constructs a beautiful life is what we must do. At the end of the day, we want to have fought the good battle and to have lived by exceptional example. Understanding and appreciating the fragility of life allows us to live with newfound intensity.

Living within the sacred space of a single moment provides shelter from the unknown. It helps us to embrace the life that we have and stop worrying about tomorrow, a week from now or even next year.

Sometimes our disease commands center stage, but it cannot be allowed to take away the joy. As it turns out, being fully engaged in the moment opens us up to experience a series of extraordinary moments that connect into the architectural web of our life, thereby cultivating joy.

The scaffolding of our life is stronger when we pay attention to what lies beneath the surface. Our inner conversations that we have with ourselves are significant. We have to supervise the unconscious mind because it shapes our perceptions, which in turn creates our sense of reality. If our inner voice is saying all the wrong things, then this negative dialogue becomes what we believe. As soon as we let go of the negativity, we are free to entertain a world of possibilities — a world where humor replaces taking ourselves too seriously, a world where we treat ourselves with respect and learn to advocate effectively, a world where there is a climate of self-affirmation and a world where we have learned to nurture ourselves. In this world, we are the artists who have painted the masterpiece that depicts the life that we aspire to.

Our disease can mentor us like the practiced, accomplished professor. Through perseverance, the language of suffering can be rewritten. Our story will carry the theme of chronic illness, but we will honor the rest of the story. It can be one with a deep reverence for the life that we have. ■

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