



Life as a 20-Something

10 Rules for Surviving Chronic Illness in Your 20s

By Ilana Jacqueline

THERE ARE TONS of things no one tells you about your 20s. Like the fact that you'll probably be in credit card debt for the next 10 years. Or, that you'll be expected to make new friends who are like you when you have almost zero definition of what you are like. Not to mention that you will be able to visually tell if you ate carbs the night before based on the size of your muffin top.

Add to that your basic life-with-chronic-illness woes: how to tell friends about your disease, when to bring up your latest hospitalization on your first date, and how to get out of that party so you can go home and crash — and it's basically a minefield of situations ranging from incredibly awkward to downright dangerous.

That said, and some 23 years of chronic illness behind me, here are 10 rules to surviving chronic illness in your 20s:

1. Say goodbye to your pediatrician. If those lollipops you're collecting at the pediatrician's office are sitting next to your college class schedule, you've overstayed your welcome.

2. Don't be afraid to get a second opinion. Just because you've been seeing a doctor for a long time doesn't mean he's the best (or only) doctor out there. This is your 20s; nothing wrong with a little experimenting.

3. Insurance is a language; get fluent. If you're lucky enough to have insurance these days, do yourself a favor and get familiar with your plan. Whether you're on your parents' plan (which you can be until age 26!) or you're getting healthcare through federal programs or your own job, you'll still want to know

ahead of time what's covered.

4. It's a small world, until it's not. In high school, you may not have had the energy, time or luck to get to know other students with chronic illnesses. Now is a good time to put a little effort forth to join or create a local support group, look for local patients online or volunteer in your college's office of student disabilities.

5. Learn to keep yourself in check. Literally. Make a list if you really have to. Are you sleeping every night? Are your symptoms getting out of control? Are your medications all working like they should? It's easy to let the management of your disease get lost in the millions of other things in life that you're responsible for.

6. Drop the drama. I operate under the rarely used 20-something philosophy that my life is plenty exciting. I don't need to create drama; my colon is probably going to do that for me. So when it comes to fair-weather friends and partners I couldn't trust with my goldfish, let alone my immune system, I'm just not in that place right now.

7. Budget for emergencies. Maybe your friends have a rainy day fund; in your case, you'd better have the resources to withstand a tsunami. If you're unable to work from home or the hospital, it's good to put up to half of your weekly paycheck into savings. If you can't budget with money, budget with knowledge of available resources for personal funding by researching charitable funds (like the Chronic Disease Fund www.cdfund.org) or government assistance.

8. Suck it up, but don't be a hero.

Having a flare-up on your sister's wedding day? Time to take a mouthful of Imodium and suck it up. Being pressured to eat four pieces of cake by your obnoxious aunt who keeps pinching your skinny arms? Don't be a hero; just say "No." Learn who, where and when it's worth it to put yourself through a little suffering, but don't give away your energy to people who don't deserve it and won't appreciate it.

9. Don't take it personally. People don't always "get" why you have to coordinate parts of your life around your chronic illness. Whether you're leaving a party early or carrying around half a pharmacy in your purse, seemingly rude comments are generally coming from a place of misunderstanding. Don't take it personally; take it as an opportunity to educate someone about your disease.

10. It isn't who you are; it's just what you have. You're not just a person who is chronically ill. You are a person, and you happen to also be chronically ill. Don't let your disease define your personality. You are so much more than an illness, and when you stop thinking of yourself in that box, others will too. ■

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