

This is the first of a four-part series in which I will share my experience, strength and hope in living with PPS. I believe that it is possible to have a progressive chronic condition and still enjoy life. This is my story.

Part I: Acceptance Is Empowering

by Carol Meyer, Greater Boston Post-Polio Association Member

I am powerless in the face of PPS. I didn't cause it, I can't do much to control it and I can't cure it. My doctors don't even know how to treat it. I have raged, blamed, felt sorry for myself and played the martyr; however, all this did was to make me exhausted, stressed out and more miserable. My PPS stayed the same! Finally it dawned on me to try a different approach, and wonder of wonders... this seems to work for me.

While I can't control what PPS will do to my body, I can control how I deal with it. Trying to avoid the issue doesn't work for me; neither does being resentful or wallowing in self-pity. Instead, I have chosen to accept my PPS and to embrace my life and enjoy it. Acceptance has been helpful in befriending my long-time foe, polio.

One of the first steps I had to do in my quest for acceptance was to look at my polio experience openly and honestly. Oh, what emotional pain lurked within all of the nooks and crannies of my soul! I grieved for all of the missed opportunities, for the person I was created to be, for the excruciating pain I felt in looking at my twisted body in the mirror, and for all of the times I felt so different and out of place. All of these losses had been stuffed inside for years, and they were preventing me from moving forward.

I didn't have to do this work alone. I spoke with other polio survivors from around the world on the Internet and attended GBPPA meetings. I worked with a therapist and joined a 12-Step group. I journaled and meditated. It took great courage to do that painful work; but as each wound was healed, I felt lighter and more peaceful. I was starting to accept my life as it continues to be affected by polio.

Acceptance doesn't mean that I like PPS or how polio has affected my life. It just means that I accept what is and who I am today. When I can accept my PPS and myself, I can move forward in my life. Acceptance can bring me serenity and happiness; it can change my whole environment. When I accept myself as I am, I feel better about life; and I don't even experience as much physical discomfort. To be able to accept is a great blessing; it doesn't take nearly the energy that resisting my PPS did. Acceptance has brought me physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being, and it has also given me gratitude.

Acceptance is a process. It doesn't happen overnight, but little by little, one day at a time. It's not a steady, uphill line either. There are days when I am more vulnerable

than others because I haven't taken good care of myself; these are the days when I have trouble accepting. They are farther apart though, and I can recognize what is going on and do something about it.

I believe that new awareness about my polio years will continue to come forward throughout my life. I am open to more grieving and healing when necessary because I know that life is better on the other side. I embrace acceptance regardless of how painful it might be; it is the only life-giving answer I've found to my PPS problems. Acceptance has empowered me to face a condition which I am powerless to defeat.

Part II: Loving Myself is Not Selfish

Love myself? What a strange idea! My religious upbringing taught me that the respectable and admirable thing to do was to put others before myself. To do differently was "selfish." Now I'm learning that if I want to be able to enjoy life in spite of my disabling PPS, I need to keep the focus on my needs first, then ... if I have the energy, time, and desire ... others.

My journey toward loving myself has been slow and awkward as I learn new thinking patterns and behaviors. Don't misunderstand me, I'm not advocating throwing the baby out with the bath water; I still have compassion for others and am willing to reach out to help someone in need. What I'm learning is that if I don't take care of myself first, I won't have the energy or the strength to meet my responsibilities, let alone try to be there for someone else. This is true for the same reason that at the beginning of a flight, the attendant instructs the passengers to put on their own oxygen masks first before helping someone else.

One of the first things I had to learn is that self-love means self-care. It implies that I value my dignity as a human being and respect my physical, emotional, and mental strengths as well as my limitations. It demands that if I'm invited to do something, I base my response on whether or not it would be good for me rather than on my desire to please someone else. If I ignore these basics, my health will deteriorate and I will lose my enthusiasm for living.

As a polio survivor who is now coping with PPS, I've found that I need to get plenty of rest, maintain a healthy diet, and limit my activities. Whenever I slip in any one of these areas, I become easily stressed out, exhausted, and depressed. Just as important is respecting my feelings. I used to stuff them because I was afraid to acknowledge and feel them. Today I know that feelings are neither right nor wrong; on the contrary, they act as my barometer, often alerting me that an emotional wound needs more healing or a past loss needs more grieving. I've discovered that when I'm clogged up with stuffed feelings, there is no room for joy or love; therefore, it's imperative that I address each feeling as it comes up.

One habit that I've developed during these past few years is keeping a gratitude journal. At the close of every day I write down 5 things that I'm grateful for. This has changed my life! It has helped me to appreciate the moment, keep my thoughts positive, and be content with my present life. I'm learning that my thoughts become my reality ... negative thoughts beget negative events while positive thoughts attract positive events. I feel grateful these days, and this goes a long way in keeping me healthy.

I've had to detach from people who live in fear, focus on the negative, and whine about how miserable they are. I do acknowledge their pain and I have compassion for them; however, I choose not to be around them today. Whenever I must be in their company, I try not to take on their negative energy; I let them keep it. I prefer to be with people who are trying to make lemonade whenever life gives them lemons; I get strength and hope from people like that. I've met many inspirational people at our GBPPA meetings, and I always leave feeling good about myself.

Another thing I do to take care of myself is to start my day off by reading something inspirational from one of my daily readers. This reminds me to be loving, gentle, and patient with myself. It often points out how unique and special I am and that I was created in perfect beauty and love. It tells me that I'm never alone ... that my Higher Power always journeys with me. Sometimes I meditate on these thoughts and let them fill my being with serenity and joy.

Finally humor is another way I can take care of myself. As my PPS set in and I became more disabled, I lost my sense of humor. My life became very serious, dark, and difficult. As I started on my path toward self-love, I actually had to schedule times for laughter and fun! A sense of humor and laughter immediately eases my tension and gives me new energy. It can magically turn a dismal day into a bright, cheerful one. I always feel so much better after a hearty laugh.

Loving my self has brought many blessings into my life and has made living with PPS more tolerable. It is proving to be one of the best healers in my life.

I will continue with the last two parts of this series in the next issue.

Editor's note: As the New Year approaches and resolutions are made, take time to reflect on who you are as a PPSer. We have all traveled a long, and many times, difficult road to where we are now. We are blessed with wonderful friends and family who help and support us in many ways. But many times, the greatest power comes from within. I have suggested (preached??) acceptance and self love to many friends in my support group over the years and they have often said it was a valuable lesson that served them well. I guess that's why these articles struck such a chord with me.

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