

## Make a Place for Your Illness and Put It in Its Place *by Pauline Salvucci*

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"A place for everything, and everything in its place." That may be a fine idea if you're eyeing the clutter on the living room floor, or a pile or two of old magazines and catalogues collecting dust in a corner. But what has it got to do with coping with illness? Plenty.

Illness is never a welcomed guest in anyone's life. However, when it becomes a visitor in yours, in many cases, it's there to stay. How you cope with it will determine, in great part, how well you love your life. Of the three primary factors which measure your ability to cope: your attitude, the social context of your life, and the quality of the resources available to you, your attitude becomes the foundation upon which the others build.

Making a place in your life for illness may sound like a strange thing to do, but it's a crucial step in learning how to cope with your disease and putting it in its place. Here are some suggestions and tips to help you do this:

### **Acceptance and Denial are Normal Responses**

When you begin to accept having an illness, you open yourself up to interacting with it. This will help you to make a place for it in your life. Feeling both acceptance and denial are normal responses to any major change, let alone a chronic illness. Some forms of illness can certainly limit you and contribute to your feeling different from other people. The thing that makes you different from others is what disease does to your body and how it can affect your emotions. Adjusting to this can be tough enough, don't make it tougher by losing your sense of self, your integrity, and, most of all, your sense of humor. Accepting yourself as a person living with an illness is a process. It doesn't happen all at once. Don't be harsh on yourself when you fluctuate between accepting your disease and denying it. Acceptance isn't something you do once and for all. It's a process. Little by little as you accept your illness, you will make room for it in your life.

### **Adapting Takes Time and Patience**

Like an onion, you peel off one layer of change at a time. The changes you are faced with challenge your ability to adapt. You may have to let go of, or even say goodbye to some activities in your life, either for a time, or perhaps permanently. Grieve this loss. Create a ritual to say goodbye to what is no longer possible for you to do, but don't deny those parts of your life which you enjoyed

and which were important to you. They are a real part of your history and deserve your respect. Some of your life may be different than it was before, but don't treat your past and the things you enjoyed as if they never existed. As you make the changes that your illness requires, you can become more flexible and creative in adapting to change. Keep a journal of the changes you've already made and how you made them. This can serve as a reminder and as a guide for making others as well. As you develop a greater degree of flexibility in adapting to change, the easier change becomes. Above all, don't lose heart!

### **Befriend Illness as Part of Your Life**

You already know how illness affects your body. Now get to know your relationship with it. If you consider your disease an enemy to be crushed, or an unwelcome guest which you refuse to tolerate, how will you allow your illness to be what it is, a part of your life which you can learn to befriend? Do you remember what Lincoln said about a house divided against itself unable to stand? If you're divided against yourself by refusing to get to know this illness, or by waging war against it, how will you come to befriend it? Consider giving your illness a name and talk with it, or write it a letter. Speak from your heart and your passion. Include in your letter everything you think and feel about your uninvited guest. Don't keep your thoughts running around in your mind creating havoc. Then, listen to what your illness says to you in return. If you find this difficult to do, don't be discouraged. It is difficult, but there are rewards. An uneasy alliance is better than none at all.

### **Feel Like You're Losing Yourself?**

Do you feel as if your blue moods are turning into dark depression? Is inertia increasingly becoming more a part of your life? Do you do less for yourself on the days when you could be doing more? Do you isolate yourself from your loved ones and friends? If over a period of time, you are regularly experiencing these feelings and can't shake them, don't hesitate to find professional help. Ask your doctor to refer you to a therapist whose specialty is working with people with chronic illness. These therapists can help you to make your way through difficult times. Yes, it's important to talk with your friends and family, but talking with a professional can be very freeing. They are available to help you sort out your experiences and the many feelings and thoughts you have about yourself and your illness. This isn't the time to "tough it out", or attempt to dismiss your feelings with a mind over matter mentality. Allow yourself to get whatever help you need. It can make a real difference in your life.

### **Too Much Illness Talk?**

Do you feel that talking about illness is taking more of your time and energy than you would like it to? Is it wearing on your family and friends? That can happen, especially when you're first learning about your illness. If it becomes a habit and you feel as if you're losing perspective, here's a way to regain your

balance. Create "talk space". Choose a comfortable place in a room in your home and make time to talk about your disease with your partner and family. Let them know what you're experiencing and thinking. This is a time for honest sharing, for you and for your loved ones. Allow this "talk space" to be the place and time where you discuss your illness. Keep the rest of your home an "illness free talk zone". This will allow you and your family to enjoy one another's company and conversation without reverting to the topic of illness.

### **Seeing With New Eyes Doesn't Mean Looking Through Rose Colored Glasses**

When it comes to putting illness in its place, you might try seeing with new eyes. When it takes you more time to do just about everything, when simple tasks frustrate you because they're not so simple to do anymore, when the familiar becomes foreign, when you can not do the many things you once loved doing, maybe seeing with new eyes can help. If you were an artist and can no longer paint, you can still go to museums or art galleries. If you can't do that, you can enjoy art on the Internet and in books. If you worked with your hands and can no longer use tools to do a job or hobby, teach someone else to do what you know how to do so well. Share your knowledge and lend your expertise. If you loved nature and the outdoors, but can no longer hike, drive along some of the scenic roadways and enjoy the beauty and majesty of nature. Find a way to keep what you have been passionate about in your life. It takes time, work, patience, spirit and heart to make a place for illness in your life. Seeing with new eyes is a tribute to courage and the ability to put this illness in its place.

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