Learning to Live With Limitations

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Accepting Your New Limits

When you are first diagnosed with fibromyalgia there are a lot of thoughts that go through your head. The following weeks, months and even years bring many new thoughts and realizations. And let's be honest, most of these are unpleasant.

One realization that can be especially difficult to accept is that you now have limitations.

Going from being a highly functioning member of society to suddenly having limits on how much you can work, care for yourself and others and how social you can be is frustrating, to say the least. However, learning what your limits are and how to live within them is an important step to accepting your new diagnosis.

Some with fibro may be scared to do anything, for fear of what the payback may be. Others may go to the other extreme and push themselves until they are unable to do anything more. These are both completely understandable reactions. However, acceptance of your new limitations can help you live the best life possible, in spite of living with an illness.

But first you must learn what your personal limits are. What one person with fibromyalgia can do may differ from what you are able to do. That is okay, there is no need to compare yourself to anyone else. Once you have learned what your limits are, you then have to set boundaries in order to live within those. How do you do this?

Learn to Say No

Oh, boy. This is a tough one for me. I have always been the person who wants to please everyone, make everyone happy, to help anyone and everyone. And while that is unrealistic for a number of reasons, the primary reason is that I am ill.

I had to learn to say no. I had to learn to explain to my boss and coworkers that I couldn't carry or move heavy boxes. I had to learn that I couldn't help friends move. I had to learn that I couldn't accept every invitation.

Yes, this occasionally leads to others getting frustrated with me, especially if they are used to me dropping everything for them. But that is something I have learned to live with. I know there may be some things I am unable to do, but that does not mean I am not valuable or helpful in other aspects. This reminder helps me to say no when necessary and to not be too hard on myself. It does get easier, I promise.

Next page: learning to pace yourself and ask for help, plus how some other fibro warriors have dealt with learning to live with limitations.

Learn to Pace Yourself

If you're like me and you have a set routine for how you do certain things, it can be bothersome when you realize that routine won't work for you anymore.

I was used to having one major house cleaning day. But as my health declined, trying to do everything in one day was impossible and left me feeling awful for days afterwards. Even so, it took me a while to wrap my head around the fact that I had to reassess the way I went about housework.

The same goes for doing errands and planning outings. I have had to learn that I can't expect myself to do a lot of things in one day, especially if they involve strenuous activity. I have had to learn to plan out periods of rest in my day.

Learn to Ask for Help

Asking for help is not always easy. But it is often an important part of living within our limits. Trying to do it all yourself is generally unrealistic.

We all have different levels of limitations, but I feel all of us at some time or another need to look to family, friends, or even mobility aids to get necessary help.

What Other Fibro Warriors Recommend

Rather than just tell you my own thoughts on this subject. I reached out to the chronically ill community on Twitter to get their input as to what has helped them learn how to live within their limits. The thoughts they shared were utterly insightful.

Many, like myself, had to learn through trial and error — pushing too far and then suffering a flare-up — to understand the importance of pacing themselves.

One had the care of her disabled son brought into question after repeated hospital stays, brought on by overexertion. Another suffered suicidal thoughts due to the flares she suffered from doing too much. Both found real motivation to find their limits and live within them.

I also received some helpful tips. One woman mentioned she is learning accept that she will likely have to change her line of work. Another said that thinking back on her activities prior to the flare helped her to adjust her activities and habits in the future. Supportive families were also of help to some.

There was also mention of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT can be helpful in number of situations, one being learning to cope with a chronic illness such as fibromyalgia. It can help with changing patterns of thinking and behavior, and while this type of treatment may not be beneficial for everyone it's something that is extremely helpful for some.

However, one of my favorite responses simply said: “Accepting that ‘limits’ doesn't mean ‘lesser’. I just do things differently now.” Doesn't that really sum it up?

Yes, we have some limitations, but that doesn't mean we are any less valuable than we were previously. We are still useful members of society. Let me say that again: You are a useful member of society!

We may have to adjust how we go about doing certain things. We may have to do fewer things in one day. We may not always be able to help others when we, or they, want us to. But none of that means we can't find another way to care for ourselves and our loved ones.

We might have to go about some things in a different way, but that's what those of us with fibro are good at — finding a way to get things done.