Being a Young Person with Arthritis

by ALI ESFAHANI

'Frustrating' Doesn't Even Begin to Describe It

Being a young person with arthritis is a truly frustrating and unique experience. Osteoarthritis is a condition that is generally thought of as a disease of the elderly, and the diagnosis comes as a shock to those of us affected with it in youth.

Arthritis is debilitating enough to limit normal activities, but not so debilitating as to have the factor associated with other debilitating diseases like ALS, spinal cord syndromes or cancer. Because of this lack of shock factor, it is difficult for many people to understand and wrap their heads around how hard it can be to live with arthritis.

My Story

I developed arthritis at the age of 21, and one of the most difficult aspects of the condition was adjusting to the changes it forced in my lifestyle. Before I developed facet-joint arthritis in three levels of my spine, I was living the life of an active adult. I was weightlifting three or four times a week, running about two or three times a week, and playing basketball twice a week. I was also involved with my school's intramural basketball, football, frisbee and soccer leagues.

Then one day I felt a twinge in my back, and the rest is history. Now I have trouble lifting objects heavier than 20 pounds, and haven't played sports in about four years. Not only does the arthritis affect me physically, it has also affected many of my relationships as well as my general outlook on life.

Impact on Relationships

As a young person, many of my relationships depended on me being active. I was friends with the people I played sports with and worked out with. When we weren't being active together, we were discussing the next time we would be active. My phone would constantly buzz with my friends wondering when we would next play basketball or go out to the volleyball courts.

As I began to relay the information to my friends that I wouldn't be able to participate in a lot of these activities anymore, I was met with a variety of responses. Most of my friends were understanding, but we simply didn't have much in common anymore and we grew apart. Others couldn't comprehend how a person my age could develop arthritis, and assumed I was exaggerating. The rest recognized and accommodated my limitations, and we grew closer.

Negative Emotions

Once the reality of the situation began to settle in, so did the negative emotions. My world had changed dramatically and I wasn't happy with it. It took a long time, but I have accepted my reality and have learned to be active in other ways, but it's still tough sometimes when I see someone playing basketball or hear my buddies

talk about their latest physical accomplishment.

I have developed a couple of coping mechanisms and strategies to help me deal with some of the negative emotions and physical limitations that my condition has created.

When I first developed osteoarthritis in my spine, a big challenge I faced was finding hobbies to replace those that involved exercising. I was bored, because I had so much free time that had previously been occupied by physical activities. I have had to adjust a lot, but have found many other meaningful activities to fill that void.

Although I can't go out and play pickup basketball for hours or deadlift 300 pounds, I can still be active in various ways. I learned the exercises and activities that do and don't aggravate my symptoms, and that has really helped me feel my age. Surprisingly, I developed a love for writing and reaching out to others with an adverse health situation like mine.

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Identifying True Friends

Going along with the theme of adjusting, my friendships and interactions with people have changed greatly. Relationships are easy to make when you are a young, active, in-shape, and around all the time. It gets a lot tougher when you can't participate in these activities and don't have as much in common with people your age anymore.

Admittedly I don't have as many friends as I used because of this phenomenon, but I like to think of my condition as a filter; who wants to have "friends" who will drop you the instant you become sick, or who don't genuinely care about your livelihood? The friendships I have now are more meaningful, have substance, and will last longer.

A New Outlook on Life

Lastly, my condition has greatly changed my outlook on life. Before I developed arthritis, I was very active but not always happy. I was preoccupied with superfluous and meaningless things that would get me down and anxious. I took my livelihood and health for granted and would look at various aspects of my life in a pessimistic manner.

My condition has forced me to appreciate my health, the many blessings in my life, and all the activities I can physically participate in. It has also helped to reinforce the importance of a strong mind and education to make up for my physical deficits; I applied and got into medical school the year after I developed arthritis and hope to use my education to help people with similar health deficits in the future.

It's easy to get caught up in the difficult moments as young person with arthritis, but keeping perspective over the long-term has helped me a lot. The pain and physical limitations from osteoarthritis will probably always be there, but that doesn't mean I won't have my good days where I can barely feel the pain.

My friends and family have also gotten better about accommodating my condition and making sure to provide the support I need. And although progress is slow, the modalities in healthcare to help alleviate the pain caused by arthritis are getting better. There is still a long way to go for proper treatment of the disease, but any improvement is better than none.

Infuriating and Exhausting, But Not All Bad

Describing arthritis for a young person as 'frustrating' is an understatement. It's infuriating to see people your age able to accomplish physical feats that you may never be able to even participate in. It's also exhausting to get your peers to understand the limitations that the disease creates when there is no shock factor.

Fortunately, it hasn't all been bad with arthritis; it has allowed me to make more meaningful relationships, I value

my health more now, and it has motivated me to use my education as a tool to help others with similar physical conditions.

I would love to hear the stories of others who are reading this post who also developed arthritis at a young age, and the strategies you have created to overcome the physical and emotional obstacles that the condition creates.