



## 3 Simple Tips for Living Well With Osteoarthritis

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### Living Well With Osteoarthritis

When I was younger, I used to listen to my doctors without question. I assumed they knew what they were talking about, never sought out a second opinion and didn't keep track of my surgeries, medications or health progress. After being diagnosed with osteoarthritis (OA), I had to learn how to go about living well with osteoarthritis.

I have to be honest: I found the process of living well with osteoarthritis incredibly frustrating at first. It's overwhelming to schedule appointments, allot time for unexpected cancellations and make sure the appointments are not interrupting too often with work. This is all while managing your symptoms at the same time.

Also, many conditions like osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus and fibromyalgia have symptoms that overlap, making a diagnosis take that much longer.

So, here are some tips you help you go about living well with osteoarthritis.

#### 1. Stay Organized

Many medical practices have gone online, allowing you to access your recent test results, send questions to your doctor and receive appointment reminders. It's great to have that as a backup but keep track of your information separately in case of a glitch. You can use technology to track your OA progress to stay on top of your symptoms and be able to share it with your doctors.

#### There's an App for That

Here are some apps that can be of use:

- **Track and React.** This is a free app that allows you to track your sleep, nutrition, exercise and medication. It will graph your flare-ups to try and pinpoint target areas. There are so many factors impacting your symptoms that it can be challenging to identify the culprits. This app will display a graph to show you what you need to focus on.
- **Osteoarthritis and Cartilage.** This is the journal of the Osteoarthritis Research Society International, connecting you with the latest in OA research. You'll need to subscribe to get full access, but the app itself is free. You can stay updated on the newest treatments and clinical information, which can be reassuring and hopeful.
- **Jointfully Osteoarthritis.** This is another free tracking app that also provides video tutorials for physical therapy exercises and pain management suggestions. These three apps are available for both Android and iPhone.

#### Keep a Journal

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If you prefer to keep a written journal of your OA management, it can show you the same patterns of what could be contributing to your symptoms. Of course, knowing what triggers a flare-up is one thing; always being able to prevent one is often out of your control.

For example, if your sleep is disrupted because of a storm or a fire engine at 2:00 a.m., it can trigger a round of insomnia that you need to pay attention to.

## **2. Be Proactive**

You can prepare for a special event and still pay the price. To give you an example, I went to a concert last Monday night. I took a half day off on Monday, and all of Tuesday to recover. The weekend prior was spent doing low-key activities and making sure I took my meds on time. I used my mobility scooter as much as I could at the venue. I'm still sore, and it is a week later. My ribs are inflamed, and my knee has flared up too. You can do everything right and still have a flare-up.

Do all you can to stay on top of your OA, but remember it is going to feel like juggling sometimes, and you will not feel like an expert in every area all the time. Take a look at what is your weakest area at the start of the week and focus your attention there.

### **Plan Your Meals**

Planning your meals for the week can save you valuable time that you can use for resting or exercising. The more organized you are, the less stressful you will feel. Stress is OA's enemy, as it increases inflammation.

You can create a Pinterest board for healthy recipes, and making a big dish of your favorite healthy meal can provide you a couple of lunches as well. A fellow teacher and I take turns bringing a salad for both of us to share once a week. It keeps us on track and gives each of us a day off in prepping our lunch!

Keeping track of your menu ideas can be done online, or you can print out a menu to add to as the week moves on. Decide ahead of time what you already have and make a list before heading to the store. Even that advanced planning will save you time and stress.

### **Plan Your Outfits**

I always thought planning your wardrobe for the week was a little too type A for me, and then OA came along and taught me to throw that judgmental thinking out the window.

Taking just a half hour on a Sunday afternoon to set aside a week's worth of clean clothes saves me so much time in the mornings! I sometimes will set them up for a particular day; other times I just put the options together and choose each night before I go to bed.

I now use that time to relax and enjoy my breakfast without hunting for clean socks. Every little bit helps!

### **Plan Your Stress Strategies**

Before OA, managing stress for me meant avoiding conflict, eating Taco Bell and taking a nap. I never thought I would have to plan how to manage stress if I just ignored or avoided it.

Facing pain management head-on made me realize that I need to schedule a time to release stress in better ways. Not only does it improve my mental health, but it also helps with inflammation as well. The better care I take of myself, the happier my OA is.

Remember, you can plan your heart out and do everything you are supposed to, and you will still get flare-ups and setbacks. Which brings me to...

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### **3. Nurture Your Mental Health**

You need both to feel complete. It's unlikely you can maintain the health of one at the expense of the other for very long. OA can impact your mental health because of the fatigue and pain, and it can impact your relationships at home, work and your friendships. I found that I was more short-tempered, easily frustrated and confused by how exhausted I always seemed to feel.

Actively participating in activities that bring you pleasure can help a lot. Even if you think you don't have the time, try setting a timer for just 15 minutes a day to read, listen to music or comedy, do a craft or do something that is only for you. If you don't, you are going to burn out and crash. Most likely you will set off a flare-up and end up in bed resting anyway.

#### **OA and Relationships**

You are going to find your time to be more precious than ever. I discovered in my journey with OA that some of my weaker relationships fell apart under stress, including my marriage of seven years.

What I used to have patience for I no longer did. Surgery, recovery, physical therapy and stress impacts everyone around you, no matter how hard you may try to control it. You can't.

Keep some of these suggestions in mind when trying to communicate about your needs:

- Be clear to yourself and others about what your limits are and stick to them, calmly and firmly.
- If you can substitute a planned activity for something more accessible, ask!
- Take time to breathe, regroup and rest when needed. It's essential!
- Talk to someone like a therapist to work through frustrations.
- If you lose your patience with someone and they deserve an apology, keep it short, honest and do your best to control your temper as best you can.

#### **Implementing Boundaries**

It took me a long time to say no clearly, simply and without guilt. When you say yes to actively doing everything you can to ease your OA symptoms, you are saying no to something else.

OA demands a chunk of your daily schedule whether you like it or not, and that means giving up something that once took its place.

Choose people who care about you just as much as you care about them. If you notice that some relationships don't work anymore, gracefully let them quiet down. You need to carve out peace for yourself wherever you can because you need all your energy to manage your pain, fatigue, frustration and life with OA.

Say yes to proper nutrition, plenty of water, a good night's sleep, gentle exercise and time to reflect. Keep track of your symptoms and appointments, your workouts and sleep habits. Controlling what you can for your physical and mental health should improve your OA symptoms and make them easier to manage.