

Looking for GROWTH



In the midst of illness

By Nicole Relyea

We all hope to never have to face the diagnosis of a long-term illness or disease that will change our lives and affect our families. But illness is part of life, and the experience can be an opportunity for growth.

When living with an illness, our time and energy become more limited and therefore more valuable, says **Dr. Nancy Selfridge**, chief of complementary medicine at **Group Health Cooperative** in Madison. Looking at your beliefs and priorities and figuring out what matters most to you is an important step. “Once you do that,” Selfridge says, “the things that matter least become pretty obvious and letting go of them is easier.”

Selfridge speaks from experience. She was raising her children when she was diagnosed with fibromyalgia many years ago. When the illness placed more demands on her time and energy, she had to find other things to let go of, such as always having an immaculate house.

Selfridge says she had to “learn to be selfish” and put her own needs first, because if she didn’t take care of her own health, she couldn’t take care of her family. “Illness teaches you that your body is like a tool; if you don’t keep your saw sharpened it’s useless. All of the sudden illness elevates the priority of self-care.”

Chronic stress is frequently the greatest complication for those coping with illness. It’s no surprise that a diagnosis can create a lot of stress, but the stress can exacerbate disease and make things even more difficult. This is

part of why GHC now offers so many programs in complementary medicine (including massage, energy therapy and yoga) and many practitioners emphasize the importance of stress management and meditation.

In addition to taking care of your personal needs, you will need to find ways to manage the financial and other aspects of your illness. **The Center for Patient Partnerships**, a program that is part of the UW Law School, works to provide information, education and training to patients, educators, and those studying to work in health-care fields regarding models of care and patient empowerment. Here, you can get free assistance with many issues of disease management, such as employment, insurance, figuring out how to manage your family, and learning how to adapt to new limitations.

All of this information can be a lot to take in at once. **Ann Haase-Kehl**, a patient advocate for The Center for Patient Partnerships, recommends “resisting the urge to get it all figured out right away.” She emphasizes that it is an ongoing process, and that you have the right to take it at your own pace. As someone who has lived with rheumatoid arthritis for over 30 years, she says she is “always learning, which is why a meditation-type practice is so important...it



Photo by Paskus Studio, Inc.

Dr. Nancy Selfridge, chief of complementary medicine at Group Health Cooperative, keeps her fibromyalgia in check by letting go of things that aren’t a priority.

helps us to understand how we’re viewing and valuing things, and so that we’re not just reacting without awareness.”

Dr. Jessica Bartell, the director of clinical quality and service for GHC, underlines the importance of taking an active role in the management of your health. She recommends taking someone with you to doctor’s appointments to help you sort out and remember the information, and so that someone else understands what is going on with you.

Learning about and understanding your illness and being able to make decisions about your care is empowering and helps to prevent the “victim” feeling that is so easy to fall into when one is ill. Bartell says that sometimes patients react to an undesirable diagnosis by ignoring their health, feeling that their body has “betrayed” them. But it is extremely important to be able to realize when you aren’t functioning as well as you could. Again this is why meditation and gaining a greater awareness of what is happening in your body can be important, so that you are taking care of all parts of your health—body, mind and soul.

Susan Henderson, a facilitator for the “Renewing Life” program at **Meriter Hospital**, helps patients to realize that “life is made up of lots of circumstances, and you either get victimized, or you learn from it.” Like Selfridge, she finds it extremely important for those coping with illness to “learn how to be authentic in the midst of your choices, relationships, and the way you spend your time and your energy; this may involve changing old beliefs, saying ‘no’ to things, and choosing new things you haven’t

been able to choose until now.”

Henderson says that this process really begins with bringing attention to yourself, and finding ways to relax and get in touch with your own feelings—both physical and emotional. “It’s about not just focusing on the disease, but focusing on what is right, what is working, what makes your spirit

come alive and what makes your heart sing.”



Nicole Relyea is a writer and practitioner of healing arts in Madison. She follows a regular meditation practice and supports the growth of the field of complementary medicine.

You can still be a babe

Jenni Prokopy of Chicago was only 25 years old when she was diagnosed with fibromyalgia, asthma and Raynaud’s phenomenon. Along with struggling to control her symptoms, Prokopy struggled with the reactions her condition elicited. “You’re way too young to feel that way.” “But you look fine.”

Once she started having more good days than bad, Prokopy started **ChronicBabe.com**, an online community for younger women with chronic health issues.

Articles on the site cover topics from how to be intimate while wearing a portable electrocardiogram machine to where to shop for cute pill containers and stylish medical ID bracelets.

As Prokopy says on the site: “I am not my chronic stuff. I am a young, creative, passionate, generous, driven woman. I’m a Babe. I’m here to share what I know with you, and to create a space for others to share their successes, so that you can be a Babe too.”

Check it out at www.chronicbabe.com.

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