

Achieving Acceptance by Volunteering

Many people are aware that they have a high likelihood of being diagnosed with some form of arthritis in their lifetime due to family medical history. I was not one of those people. When I was diagnosed with RA as a young adult, I started the long roller-coaster ride through the “five stages” model, originally authored by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in the 1960’s. These stages, which consist of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance, have been applied to many forms of personal loss over the years.

I was not happy to hear that I had a progressively degenerative joint condition that has no cure. In fact, I was so unhappy that I sought out at least four opinions from different rheumatologists (denial). After receiving confirmation from a multitude of doctors, I spent many years being angry about something I could not fix, control with medication sure, but not “fix”. While emotions affect everyone differently, I know that many will agree with me when I say that being angry for long periods of time just makes one tired, both emotionally and physically. I was tired enough, in fact, that I slid into the bargaining stage almost without realizing that I had.

Bargaining, where a person tries to deal with bad news or a tough situation through rationalization, involved telling myself that I would never have an arthritis flare-up if I did not move much. Becoming a couch potato was my bargaining tool of choice. I figured that if I did not move much, my joints would not hurt anymore. Of course, if you lay on the couch enough you gain weight, which in turn is just harder on the joints, and being fat *and* in pain shuttled me to the next stage: depression.

Depression, especially for an “action will fix this!” type of person afflicted with arthritis – regardless of the form – is a grueling experience. However, there is one benefit to this step. If

you can emerge on the other side of your depression and move into acceptance, then you begin to realize that if you take your regular medications faithfully, perhaps, this whole “arthritis thing” (as my parents referred to my RA), is indeed something that can be dealt with over the long-term. But how to get out of a depression this deep? I tried anti-depressants, which helped – a little, but not enough to get me to fully accept my RA. Enter the Arthritis Foundation.

Acceptance was an elusive concept always just beyond my grasp. I often wondered how other people come to accept that they have a condition that will not just “go away.” I figured that, since I am not a “support group” sort of person (though support groups are an exceptional tool for others), I would seek out others that are dedicating their lives to the pursuit of helping those with arthritis. Here in Seattle, the group that stands at the forefront is the Arthritis Foundation. I rationalized, healthily this time, unlike before, that I would help those that are faithfully helping me. Shortly after contacting the Pacific Northwest Chapter’s coordinator (Claire at cwinstead@arthritis.org), I became a volunteer.

Twice a week I come in and help out around the office and, at least in my mind, help those that are helping me. After 10 years of going through the first four stages, I have happily arrived at the fifth and last stage of the Elisabeth Kübler-Ross model: acceptance, through volunteering to help others. While I still have my daily physical aches and pains, I am no longer emotionally tired of being angry, tired of being depressed or just tired in general. Volunteering helped me “ascend” to acceptance, and I am sharing this with you today because I think it just might help you, too.