What Is It Like Living With Osteoarthritis?

by ALI ESFAHANI

Living With Osteoarthritis

Living with osteoarthritis is like juggling the aspects of your life with the extra weight of chronic pain and fatigue affecting each one.

Your family, job, friends, significant other, health, and stress management strategies: each one demands your attention, and when one becomes shaky it's easy for the others to follow suit.

What I find overarching in every aspect of living with osteoarthritis is the importance of communication. You will need to learn how to listen to your body and communicate your needs to others around you.

I often need to remember that communication is not just about expressing yourself.

How It Can Affect Our Lives

The pain associated with arthritis can be hard to accept because of some of the lifestyle changes that must be made to accommodate living with osteoarthritis.

One of the most difficult adjustments is to the fact of the matter is people with osteoarthritis are not going to be able to be as active as they once were.

The pain associated with arthritis can also negatively affect one in other ways besides physically. It can have a tremendous impact on the mental health and social life of an individual.

Research has shown that the pain and psychological effects of arthritis can combine into a perpetual cycle, making it even harder to live with the condition.

Mood and anxiety disorders occur with greater frequency among persons with arthritis than those without arthritis across diverse countries.

Why Communication and Osteoarthritis Go Hand-In-Hand

Learning how to manage osteoarthritis with your family can be complicated because family relationships are, in fact, often complicated. Your family sees you at your best and your worst, and it's easy to lose your temper with them when you're frustrated.

The trick is trying not to take it out on anyone, and making amends when you do. Staying on top of your stress management strategies will help keep your emotions in a healthy place, and communicating with your family about how they can help also includes telling them what you don't find helpful.

Having these conversations when everyone is rested, fed, and not in a strained mood is ideal so you can keep the stress to a minimum.

Being assertive about your health decisions can sometimes lead to having your choices on the table for discussion from many people around you. While most likely well-intentioned, you still need to do what's best for you.

Stick to what you're trying and communicate with your doctor on what your unique plan should look like, and let others' opinions roll off.

We Feel Pain All The Time From Our Osteoarthritis

Pain management is going to be an integral part of your arthritis journey, and there are no shortages of options to consider.

One thing I've learned is always to pay attention to any new pain and not just write it off as "arthritis" and keep pushing through. Your arthritis may be weakening surrounding ligaments and muscles, leaving you prone to injury more quickly than before.

I was confident that new hip pain was just arthritis in my hip that I could do nothing about, only to learn it was severe osteoarthritis in my lower spine with disc degeneration and disfigurement.

There are osteoarthritis medications you can get prescribed from your doctor to help with the stiffness and pain, but I've found that the times of being pain-free are few and far between.

In addition to taking anti-inflammatory medication and rounds of steroids to reduce inflammation, I also work hard to improve my diet, gentle exercise when I'm able to, take Epsom salt baths frequently, and have found some acupuncture helpful.

Each of these strategies has their drawbacks and benefits that you need to decide for yourself. Look for activities that improve your mood, like watching comedies with friends, to relaxing your body by taking a baby goat yoga class. (Seriously, that's a thing, and I'm so eager to try it!)

One last piece of advice when it comes to prescription medications. Anti-inflammatory medication needs to be monitored to make sure it doesn't raise your blood pressure or have any other adverse effects.

Pain medication can be a huge help, just always remember to take it as directed to avoid any problems.

Next page: What is it like working with osteoarthritis, lifestyle changes that people living with osteoarthritis can make including exercise tips, nutrition tips, and dealing with flare-ups.

What Is It Like Working With Osteoarthritis?

I'm very fortunate to work in a school community that is supportive and healthy for me. As much as possible, do everything you can to reduce your workload and create more time in your schedule for exercise, rest, and self-care.

When I feel overwhelmed making this kind of decisions, I return to my priorities of taking care of my health and work from there.

Since I was diagnosed with severe osteoarthritis in my spine this summer, driving is out of the question if I'm going to keep working where I do. I love teaching at my school, and my job provides me the means to support my child as a single mom, so I need to do whatever I can to keep myself there and healthy.

I then work my schedule and family priorities in reverse, since I am of little physical help to anyone anyway. I'm more careful about how much extra I take on at work since often I have to cancel if I'm not physically up to it.

Lifestyle Changes that People Living With Osteoarthritis Can Make

Gentle Exercise

One of the biggest challenges that come with living with osteoarthritis is the challenge to exercise, stay active despite being in pain, and avoid constant stiffness.

It is encouraged that people that suffer from arthritis do low-impact exercises such as biking, swimming, and walking. If those don't appeal to you, see our whole list of recommended exercises for osteoarthritis here.

It's important to stay active because becoming overweight can increase arthritic pain and increase the complications associated with arthritis. Extra weight is a stress on your body can cause more pressure on the joints.

Inactivity of the joints can also lead to atrophy of the surrounding muscles and a perpetuation of the pain cycle. Although many people with arthritis wake up stiff, stretching in the morning and at night can help immensely.

Lastly, if sitting at a desk or watching TV, adjust your position often and walk around every half-hour.

Susan's Tips About Exercising With Osteoarthritis

Exercising with arthritis is a daily decision based on a myriad of factors. Deciding when to push through a workout and when to rest your body is something that you may never perfect.

You make the best decisions you can base on your current pain and fatigue levels, and it can still backfire on you. I do know one thing, as I have not mastered this skill as of yet, and that is you cannot give up! If you need to rest, at least get some gentle yoga or stretching in.

Swimming is an exercise that can make you feel invincible, by the way, and is highly recommended for the best exercise for sufferers of osteoarthritis or other pain conditions. It takes all the pressure off your joints. Every time I'm in the water I'm reminded of how I used to move before osteoarthritis: without any pain or stiffness.

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It's so important to take care of your body as much as you can. It won't cure osteoarthritis, but it will help you endure it a bit better.

Proper nutrition

The proper diet program and supplements can help immensely with the pain associated with arthritis. A single herb or food might not cure someone of their pain, but a proper osteoarthritis diet can help.

Feeding your body the best nutrition may dramatically contribute to improving your symptoms of osteoarthritis. There are foods out there that are known to help suppress inflammatory diseases and ease the pain.

The foods that help with chronic pain are thought to do so by providing antioxidants and suppressing inflammation, which are factors believed to perpetuate the pain cycle.

Some of these wonder-foods include:

- Fish

- Lettuce
- Spinach
- Nuts
- Low-fat dairy
- Tomatoes
- Turmeric

On the other hand, foods that can exacerbate arthritic pain, which includes sugary and fried foods.

Although the research isn't conclusive, there are increasing notions that proper supplementation can help with the pain of arthritis.

Such supplements include:

- Vitamin K and Vitamin D
- Magnesium
- Glucosamine Chondroitin

Susan's Tips for Eating Well

Don't try to eliminate everything all at once. Start off eliminating or significantly reducing amounts of various sugar sources one at a time.

I've worked to reduce dairy, as that is something that I have overdone in the past and don't think it's helping. I was so convinced they were inherently "healthy" that I neglected to educate myself on the fact that there are extra sugar and salt in most dairy products.

In fact, switching to a whole food, plant based diet has been shown to help tremendously with inflammation and weight management, so the focus for me has been to improve my health through what I'm choosing to eat and drink.

Know Your Limitations

One of the hardest things to accept when living with osteoarthritis is that you have your physical limitations. It varies from person to person and only you know the activities that will increase the pain in your joints.

For some people this means checking their ergonomics, for others, it means keeping the joint as warm as possible. Knowing your limitations is very different from living a scared life; people who have arthritis are still encouraged to engage in as many normal activities as possible but just to be careful.

However, pattern recognition of potential triggers is crucial in preventing the onset of pain.

Be Prepared to Deal With Flare-Ups

Although you should try to do as much as you can physically, there are always going to be some activities that will probably cause increased pain or an arthritic flare-up.

An arthritic flare-up is when the normal arthritic pain gets exacerbated by a trigger. Sometimes flare-ups will have a clear reason, such as another illness or stress, but usually, there's no obvious trigger.

This unpredictability makes it difficult to plan. An arthritic flare can be very painful and disruptive to your everyday activities. In case an activity does cause an arthritic flare-up, be proactive and prepared for it; this may consist of knowing what medication or therapies can get you through the flare-up.

Open communication with your doctor can be beneficial in helping to get you the right medication and plan to

avoid being in too much pain during the flare-ups.