

Sjögren's Syndrome: An Optimistic Outlook

When realising April was Sjogren's Syndrome month, it got me reflecting on my own experience with the disorder. I am now seven years from diagnosis of Sjogren's and I'd like to share that in the last eighteen months my physical resilience and stamina has improved and my symptoms have declined. My purpose for sharing is to give hope to newly diagnosed sufferers of this condition. Four years ago I wrote an article for Wellbeing magazine about my journey with Sjogren's, where I described the physical and mental trauma I'd experienced in the first years of the disorder. At the time I was generally accepting of a new me, one that wasn't capable of being as active as old me but I was content with my lot. I'd say on reflection that around this time if I pushed myself physically I would often rebound with symptoms of fatigue, dryness or discomfort of some sort. Now I can walk my dog for hours one day, walk the golf course for two hours the next and swim laps for 50 minutes in the ocean baths the next and pull up as normal. I wasn't able to do this a few years ago and I'm not sure if I wasn't capable or I just didn't approach a return to fitness properly.

My treatment regimen hasn't changed as I still take Plaquenil, flaxseed oil and Vitamin D daily and I have kept up monthly Five Elements acupuncture sessions for the last seven years. As important as medicine is quality sleep to me. I have also practised regular yoga over the last seven years. I think in the last two years my stamina stepped up incrementally as I approached new fitness challenges in a balanced way. Last year I added a Be Active aerobics class (low impact for older people) once or twice a week, I also started a weekly golf clinic that progressed to walking the course once a week for 9 holes and more recently I've been doing a swimming proficiency class that has again improved my aerobic fitness and also swimming style.

I can't recommend swimming highly enough as a therapeutic sport. I particularly enjoy swimming in the ocean baths but I'm sure you could achieve the same enjoyment in a local pool. It is so gentle on your body and your resilience and endurance builds gradually. I swim with a group for these classes and I am the slowest but when I get out of the pool I feel like my body is strong and it hasn't failed me. I have only been doing this class for the last four months and I've experienced an elevation of mood through it's endorphin effect. I enjoy the sense of community swimming with a group brings, but I also get more out of swimming by myself now. I am hoping to swim through this winter in a wetsuit. I have done this spasmodically in the past and I find the cold water is great for arthritic pain and it also gives a sense of exhilaration and being at one with the ocean and the sky. I checked with Dr Reeves before I undertook cold water swimming years ago and I don't stay in the water very long.

What is different about my approach to fitness now is that I try to listen to my body and don't overdo anything, no matter how much you enjoy it at the time. I think it can be hard to judge with this disorder, you are something like a lithium battery in that you can operate as normal until you can't. Sometimes there's no sign that you're about to fall off a cliff of fatigue. But if I'm experiencing signs of mouth dryness, tiredness or aches and pains I back off physically and rest. These symptoms happen less and I find I bounce back much better these days.

My Sjogren's article is still on the Wellbeing website, so if you want to contrast the me of four years ago with where I find myself now, have a read of it. I hope these reflections help those who find themselves overwhelmed and doubtful as to where this disorder may take them, as I'd like to show your journey may be one of healing.