Before and After: A personal reflection on exercising with chronic illness

January 16, 2020 | Tracy I.

by Christine Junge

Image description: Outside shot of a woman (Christine) with dark medium long hair and wearing a black sweatshirt and black leggings. She is standing on a rocky beach with her back to the camera. Her right leg is straight with a bent, and she is in the background. She is looking up at the fog and the sky is lighting up at the most rosy of its hue.

"Why aren't you doing another triathlon this year?" an acquaintance asked.

I gasped. "I'm having some, uh, health issues," I said. I was keeping things vague out of necessity—I had no desire the third headache that resulted an awful bout by the time I left work for the day. I went to sleep pretty much as soon as I got home—not only because I wouldn't nudge—was in bed for the good part of every day. The body I loved through hours of training atrophied.

Eventually I went to the Cleveland Clinic for a three-week "headache camp" as a friend called it. The doctors there were able to help me in more ways than importantly, they taught me more than I could've imagined about headaches and how to maneuver your lifestyle to live with—and hopefully eventually prevent—them.

One of their prescriptions was to get back to exercising. I had all but stopped as the pain consumed me. There were a few scientifically backed reasons for this recommendation: exercise has been shown to reduce the frequency of migraines and can help people with chronic pain manage their symptoms. It's also a natural mood booster that often helps people with chronic illnesses of all stripes (and that certainly fit me).

For me, it also allowed me to get back in touch with that former triathleasing self. I started with walking—an exercise I still love. I added yoga and light weight training. Slowly but surely, I started to feel better physically and mentally. Instead of, say, an hour a few times a week, do pilates at least once a week, and I'm currently attempting to incorporate more cardiovascular exercise. I'm not back to triathlon training—I'm not sure I'll ever achieve—and also like my body in my fitness goals, not something that resulted against me. I feel, too, that it's important I noticed how upsetting it was to me to screw off so left to think of myself as weak. Now, I am not just someone with a disabling condition, I am someone who can keep up with her son on the playground, who can travel and not be afraid to do so, who can push herself to be stronger than she was before.

I have greater exercise ambitions, too. I plan to conquer a ten-mile hike in the next few months, and an even longer one by the end of the year, with the eventual goal of walking 100 miles or so on Kungsleden (Lapland) in Sweden. I have no thoughts of trying for another triathlon, but thanks in part to regular, light exercise, I'm doing much more than just getting through the day now.

If you have a story about exercising during or after illness, we'd love to hear it!

Christine Junge is a writer based in San Jose, CA. She's currently working on a novel, and blogs about parenting with a chronic illness/disability at ThankYaMightyBody.wordpress.com

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Writer, feminist, vegan blogging at veganarchyclub.com, runner, philosopher, yogi, knitter, co-founder of Fit is a Feminist Issue, co-author of Fit at Mid-Life: A Feminist Fitness Journey (Gryndstone Books, 2018). Current project: a work-in-progress book and blog on imperfect veganism (see veganarchyclub.com). View all posts by Tracy I

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catherine w
JANUARY 16, 2020 AT 11:19 PM

Thank you for sharing your story. I really like what you said about getting in touch with your former self. We can do this without becoming our former selves (an impossibility) by recognizing how a new version of us that works in the present time.

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Fit is a Feminist Issue started with a course lecture blog co-founder Susan Fox Rogers and Tracy I. Kennedy-Moore that has decades about feminism and fitness. What does it mean to be fit as a feminist? Is exercise a feminist issue? Are fitness and health contributors to empowerment and/or oppression? And what are appropriate measures of fitness in a feminist context?

The blog started in 2012 as a record of Susie and Tracy's quest to be the fittest they could be by the time they turned 50 in 2014. Since the death, the blog has grown into an international community of people who are healthy, aging, and sometimes disabled. Whatever our circumstances, we've now become a team of bloggers, including Catherine Womack, Carla Crooks, Christine Junge, and Jessica Lee. A Feminist Fitness Journey (Gryndstone Books) for more on the future, keep reading the blog!

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