

SYMPTOMS MAY VARY

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ONE OF MY FAVORITE movies as a kid was 1987's *Innerspace* with Martin Short and Dennis Quaid. This science-fiction comedy follows a Navy pilot, Tuck Pendleton (Quaid), as he participates in a secret military miniaturization project. A rival organization, seeking to use the technology for their own purposes, kills the lead scientist and his team on the day of the experiment. Instead of being injected into a rabbit (for research), Tuck is wrongly injected into grocery store worker and hypochondriac Jack Putter (Short). The two men must work together to safely remove Tuck before he runs out of oxygen, messes up one of Jack's internal organs, and is caught by the bad guys. There is also a nice little love triangle involving rom-com queen Meg Ryan, who would later go on to marry Quaid in real life. What I loved about the movie, beyond the hilarious and often ridiculous plot, was seeing what the inside of the human body *could* look like, which promptly turned my imagination into overdrive. It's no wonder the film won the Academy Award for Best Visual Effects that year.

The film is nearly 40 years old now, and I (still) think about it. Especially when I'm whining and crying, sick of hearing myself complain about my endless parade of pain. Which is when I like to imagine what it would be like to speak to my chronic illnesses. You know, from inside the body.

(clears throat)

Hey, you! Endometriosis! Um, Nancy out here says that we "look so good," so it can't be possible that you're causing this much havoc on my body. So, yeah, Imma' need you to—well, I don't know—divert the elevated estrogen levels from my glowing skin and move it around a bit. Something more physically representative of being and looking sick. Like, maybe, some sunken eyes, yellowed skin, or adult acne to convey how shit we feel. And if you could stop spreading your wickedness to my bowels, bladder, urethra, nerves, and thoracic areas, that would be superb! I would really like to get some sleep and, I don't know, maybe have the energy to do something other than lie in bed all weekend. Great, thanks.

Polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS)... I'm so sick and tired of your elusive bullshit. If it's not hair overgrowth, oily, thinning hair, or uncomfortable weight gain, then it's the random kick and strain from the large ovarian cysts (endometriomas) produced by endo and the little ones you're competing with her about. Look, we don't have a uterus anymore. We don't have fallopian tubes or even a cervix, and we know that endometriosis is the diva bitch of this place, but please don't compete with her. Can we just have some downtime, please? Please.

And you... you know who you are. You've been here just as long and can't make up your mind, like, ever. What will it be this time? Dairy? Meat? BREAD?! We're already so allergic to everything: fresh fruit, fresh veggies, nuts, fish, ginger, etc., etc. This game is old now, son. I just want to eat some healthy shit without people questioning the validity of my disease. Because if one more waiter refuses to take my condition seriously—if one more time I end up in the ER from an accidental contamination—well, I may just eat a salad and take life's longest nap. Ja' feel me?

Then, before leaving the humidity of my body—because I imagine it to be a hotbox of disease—I would point to everything: every organ, muscle, tissue, and nerve, very aggressively like a child needing reprimanding. Then I'd say something like, "...and you! All of you—asthma, high blood pressure, chronic sinusitis, potential lipedema, and anything else thinking of making their presence known. Imma' need you to sit down and think twice about this. We are fully stocked. Beyond our limit. So, chill da' fuck out, okay. I need some time to recuperate and get better."

But getting better seems more unbelievable than this insane conversation I have with my body. As if it were hanging from the bleachers listening to my preverbal speech. As if it really ever cared about me, about us.

The truth is, I have only recently come to accept the fact that I am living with a chronic illness, or multiple chronic illnesses. Why? I guess I never really accepted that any of my conditions were chronic. Maybe it's that blue-collar, working-class upbringing. You know, that pull yourself up by the bootstraps mentality. Get on with it because life doesn't stop just because you don't feel well. Maybe that's my American-ness, where we work to live. Where our jobs are at jeopardy—our livelihoods, if we pause long enough to care for ourselves. Which I have never been good at.

Now that I think of it, I don't remember hearing about chronic illness until much later in life. Doctor visits were rare for me growing up, and the worst

things I knew about were cancer and death, and those two things were usually interconnected. So, if what I had wasn't *that*, then that meant I was okay. Now, at 41, after a plethora of experiences, I've finally accepted the truth and I'm done pretending *I'm fine*. And I have no shame in saying, "Hi, my name is Felicia, and I'm living with stage 4 endometriosis, PCOS, asthma, and chronic food and environmental allergies." AKA: I'm a mess.

In the past, I've often felt ashamed about my condition. Embarrassed, even. Ex-boyfriends or friends used to roll their eyes because, once again, I had to cancel plans due to horrific periods or ongoing illness. Doctors, so many doctors, blamed my symptoms on "just a bad period" and refused to further examine me...for over 20 fucking years. *Because* of poor medical care, I ultimately became infertile, had internal organs fuse together, and lost most of my internal reproductive organs. I even went into early menopause overnight. Biased, uneducated, or lazy clinicians have altered the trajectory of my life and never had to deal with the aftermath—the mental and emotional anguish that resulted.

Dining used to be a fun experience for me; food was an easy adventure, but now it just causes stress and anxiety. Waiters at restaurants have refused to believe my allergies and have—no joke—laughed in my face when I've explained my condition. Once I was accused of lying—*yeah, sure, how can you be allergic to fresh fruit and veggies? Are you a child?* Restaurant staff have even flat-out refused my requests by bringing me what I politely asked to be removed from my plate. And, let me be clear, I was never asking for something that required a new mix or recipe to be made. I often ask for the most simple of adjustments: a plain hamburger and no salad on my plate, no fruit in my soft drink, or no nuts on my dessert.

Trust me, I don't want to be a pain in the ass, but after a while, you start to feel like the problem. Defeated and deflated, you wither and retreat instead of inconveniencing others. It's easier, it seems, to give up and give in than to advocate for yourself. Honestly, you're not even sure what that means or how to do it. You question everything and begin to disengage with friends and family, stop eating out, and believe that by speaking up, you're only complaining. You're no longer you, you fear.

Those of us living with a chronic illness carry the burden of our condition, and it can manifest in self-hatred, insecurity, and depression. When your body betrays you, it's hard to reconcile. Basically overnight everything changes. Everything hurts. Nothing makes sense. You question your reflection—is *that*

some sort of extraterrestrial humanoid staring back at me? Inflammation swells, rashes appear any and everywhere, and you experience the type of fatigue that can only rival Sleeping Beauty. Only you feel far from beautiful. You feel like a shell of who you used to be and wonder how anyone will ever think you're desirable again. It's no wonder that chronic illness has been found to exacerbate despondency.

I've read numerous studies over the years about the correlation between long-term conditions and poor mental health. For me, I won't deny that depression has played a part in my journey, but anger is what made me finally accept my diagnosis. If I had spoken up much earlier in my life, I may not have ended up with three surgeries in five years. Maybe I would have been able to have children or still be able to dance or do yoga without feeling exhausted and riddled with pain. I'm angry because it didn't have to be this way.

Luckily, I've learned to be much more transparent with those around me. Today if I don't feel well, I just say it. I don't spare conversations from the fear of uncomfortable pauses, pity, or misunderstandings. Instead of saying, "I'm fine," I now respond with something more honest and maybe, slightly, TMI. Like, "Yeah, I'm having an endo flare today and not feeling well," or "Hormone depletion, from my latest endo surgery, is causing intense hot flashes and migraines, so I'm feelin' shit today, to be honest."

And what I've found is that just because I'm comfortable with my chronic illnesses doesn't mean everyone else is.

Chronic illnesses are often known as invisible illnesses. Outsiders don't always understand what someone (with a chronic condition) is going through because they cannot physically see it, unless it's so far advanced that it's causing major complications or has become life-threatening. Many assume that those suffering are lazy, reclusive, or just some whiny hypochondriac. They can't make sense of one's world when they cannot grasp it. Instead, they may pass judgment or even ridicule, such as bullying. But when more than half of the population is living with more than one chronic illness—which is far more than you'd expect, you begin to wonder why we have such a hard time believing one another.

I suppose it comes down to masking our symptoms and accommodating others for the sake of making everyone feel comfortable. Whether it's to prove we're *okay* to keep a job or relationship or not miss out on an opportunity or project. The quality of our lives has been dependent upon appearing agreeable

and flexible, despite how we feel. So, our 20-50% *better*—our get up, get dressed, and smile—is often perceived by others to be *healed*. When, in fact, it's not even close.

Having a chronic illness, for me, hasn't *just* been about accepting my condition but learning to accept that I'll never get better. Sure, I can make life adjustments to better manage my pain and symptom management, but there is no cure. I will have *many* bad days and sometimes they will outnumber the good. The best I can do is prepare for the journey ahead by being more gracious with myself and others. And I believe if we were all more outspoken—if we were to act with advocacy in mind—then maybe we could slowly (but surely) educate others and make great change. Or, at the very least, make things easier on ourselves.

But the greatest change starts within ourselves, doesn't it?

I think I'd like to talk to my body again. This time, with more empathy and understanding. Like, hey—you, all of you! Look, I won't deny that this journey hasn't been positive in some ways. Our condition has connected us to so many people from all over the world. They see themselves in us, and we see ourselves in them. We're not alone, like we feared. And—yes, I complain a lot, but that doesn't mean I don't notice all the hard work you've done. I'm looking at you—white blood cells, lymphnodes, and spleen. And you, antibodies, you're one of our biggest defenders. Honestly, you're all soldiers and have put in *a lot* of overtime. You've kept me as healthy as possible. Hell, you've kept me alive. You provided the signs when I wasn't sure, and you gave me the time to accept, to fight, and to speak up. Honestly, I'm so proud, so grateful. Whatever lies ahead, I know you will do your very best for me. For us. Thank you.

SYMPTOMS MAY VARY is not just a personal essay—it's a reflection of my journey through the reluctance and eventual acceptance of living with multiple chronic illnesses, including endometriosis, PCOS, asthma, and chronic allergies. It's a raw, unfiltered, and often ridiculous, account of how I navigate life with these conditions. My hope is that it not only resonates with readers, but that it can offer insight to those curious about the lives we live.