An Invisible Illness

Disabilities exist in all shapes and sizes. While all disabilities have unique attributes, some are more visibly obvious than others. Hidden disabilities tend to have symptoms that fly under the radar of everyday life and are often referred to as invisible illnesses. It is important to remember that although someone might not present a visible symptom, they could still be facing health challenges that you cannot see.

I look totally normal. You would never know that the smile on my face is covering pain and discomfort. I was born with arthritis. I do not know what it feels like to not feel pain, because it is all I have ever known.

Arthritis is an invisible illness. So is Crohn's disease, Lyme disease, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, Celiac disease, and Asthma. This list goes on and on and affects more people than you would normally think.

One of the most difficult parts of living with an invisible illness is the stigma associated with it. Are we sick? Are we faking it? Only we can make that call. Our feelings are subjective to our own experiences, so it can be difficult to connect with or understand if you do not have a chronic illness.

I was diagnosed with Arthritis before the age of 2, so I have lived my entire life feeling abnormal. There are many things that I've always wanted to do but have never been able to because of my arthritis. I never did gymnastics because I was told that I couldn't. I was terrible at soccer because I was scared of hurting myself. I have to miss class because I have a compromised immune system and get sick all the time. I can't go to parties all night because I know that it might make me overtired and therefore more susceptible to being sick and in pain.

Having arthritis affects me every single day and I hate it, but nobody else knows these things unless I tell them.

Just because I look normal it doesn't mean I am. Saying that I look healthy and I should be grateful for it hurts me inside because it demean's the way that I feel. I feel like it says that my pain is less severe and should be taken less seriously.

People tell me to be grateful for what my disability affords me. They say to be positive about the parts of my life that my arthritis does not affect. But it is difficult for me to be optimistic and say that I am grateful for my arthritis because I am not. I have pains and hardships just like people that have disabilities that manifest in more obvious ways. I recognize that other people with disabilities have hardships that I may never experience. However, some people with disabilities do not have struggles that I do have. Everyone's experiences are different and nobody can judge them but the individual themselves.

During my adolescence I attended a summer camp for children with Arthritis and other connective tissue disorders. Arthritis camp was awesome because you HAD to have arthritis to go. Everyone assumed that everyone had it and it was awesome. The way that I feel was normal. Camp was a safe zone for me not to be scared of explaining myself or looking lazy.

However, advocating for myself outside of camp can be scary. I fear being yelled at every time I use my handicap pass in a parking lot. When my friends play intramural soccer and I do not join, I feel like they think I am lazy. The stigma is really hard to cope with while feeling confident in myself at the same time.

I hate that I am too disabled to be healthy and too healthy to be disabled. I feel alone a lot of the time because society tells me that I don't fit into either category.

In order to fit into my direct community, I like to advocate for myself as much as possible. I tell my friends not to make judgments for me, even if they seem helpful. It can be difficult to be a support system for someone with an invisible illness because the needs revolve around the person with the illness' subjective needs and perceptions. But know that you can be a good support system if you try to be as understanding and open-minded as possible.

If you have an invisible illness, know that you are not alone. Remember that there may be someone sitting in the seat next to you that has a similar pain on the inside. Continue to advocate for yourself. Continue to educate your friends. Do not let someone make decisions for you or tell you how to feel. You know yourself better than anyone else. Invisible illnesses are confusing but do not forget that you should never feel ashamed of your pain.