Keeping the Faith With Lupus

by ERIC PATTERSON

Navigating Lupus and Faith

While you may think lupus and faith have nothing to do with each other, when dealing with a diagnosis that invades every area of your life leaving you physically and mentally drained, there is no such things as *too many* coping skills.

You take care of your physical health. You watch what you eat. You try to exercise as much as your body allows. You work to get eight hours of restful sleep each night. You have never missed a doctor's appointment. You follow every recommendation for a test, lab work and medication change.

You take care of your mental health. You understand the impact that lupus has on your mood. You started seeing a psychotherapist to address feelings of depression and anxiety. You seek out good relationships for support. You even volunteer, because you heard it is good to give back to others.

So that's the physical and mental covered, but what about your spiritual health?

Often when stressors are high, people completely forget about this critical aspect of health and wellbeing. With your spiritual health neglected, you may feel disconnected, alone and hopeless.

When nurtured and allowed to flourish, your spiritual health helps you connect to people, places and things around you. It can reframe your perspective to find meaning from your situations, when there is meaning, hope is sure to follow.

Confusion can arise when words like faith, belief, spirituality and religion are used. Some use them interchangeably while others find the differences more numerous than the similarities. Consider these definitions:

- **Faith –** Faith is the drive that is born in everyone to find purpose, meaning and significance in the world around us.
- **Belief –** A belief is a truth or series of truths that you have learned as part of your journey.
- **Religion –** Religion speaks to an organized form of worship with traditions, rules, rituals and a strong belief system that dictates a moral code of conduct. There are many religions but Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism are the most popular by number of people.
- **Spirituality –** Spirituality tends to have looser rules and definitions. Spirituality is a person's individual view of the world/universe around them and their connection to it. It is what someone focuses their faith on and what they do to establish and maintain that connection.

These terms are clearly connected and overlap in their usage. The meaningful aspect is being able to differentiate these terms for yourself so that they make sense to you.

Think about what each one means to you and what your goal is. Would you like to have increased religion or spirituality? Would you like to have strengthened beliefs? Once you can accurately identify a goal, you can begin

engaging in activities to reach that goal.

Improving Your Religious/Spiritual Experience

Whether it is religion, spirituality, belief or faith, adding aspects of these to your life will make you well-rounded. A well-rounded person is more resilient and better able to manage stressors in his or her life.

The stress associated with lupus is high, so finding new and expanding old supports is so rewarding. Here's how:

Explore

Few people are introduced to a religion or spirituality concept as a child and feel completely satisfied with the experience throughout life. As you grow and change, your needs also grow and change. This does not mean that you should stop looking or exploring your options.

Perhaps you will be more likely to benefit from a religion or spirituality if you see what others have to offer. So much variation exists in Christianity alone that exploration could be a long-term project. List goals that you have for your religious or spiritual experience and narrow the options to ones that seem to make the most sense to you.

Educate

Now that your list has been narrowed a bit, find education on the religions or types of spirituality that interest you. Using online resources can be difficult as people carry a lot of emotional investment in their faith. As always, be sure to seek out reputable, unbiased information.

Along the way, target data regarding how this group views chronic medical conditions. Since lupus is a large part of your life, you will want a group that responds in a way that gives you comfort rather than guilt. Talk to friends who have personal experience with the areas that interest you. Work to be objective by accepting the information in nonjudgmental and unbiased ways.

Next page: More ways to improve your faith.

Improving Your Religious/Spiritual Experience

Experiment

Would you buy a pair of pants with trying them on? Would you buy a car without test driving it first? If you answered "no" then do not choose a religion based on the views of others. Instead, go for a test drive.

Churches and places of worship are always open to newcomers learning about their processes and beliefs. Find a system of experimentation that works for you depending on how long your list of possibilities has become. Maybe a different service each week is appropriate or maybe you could try it out for a month. There is no right or wrong length if it feels comfortable.

Commit

Being committed fully to the practice or principles of a religion or spiritual stance is the only way to discover the complete potential of what it has to offer. This does not mean that you must commit for your lifetime.

Think of it as a cell phone contract. Commit for a period like six months, one year or two years. After your period of commitment is over, you are free to start the explore, education and experiment process over again. If you have not found the best fit, it could mean that you are not looking in the best places.

Behaviors to Build

Utilize Supports

If you followed the steps above to identify and commit to a system, use the supports. Religious organizations and spirituality groups typically have so many resources available to their followers.

Leaders to speak with, dinners to attend and services to worship at are only the beginning of the supports you can access. Failure to seek these out and not engaging in them indicates that you are not fully committed to your faith. The consequence is that lupus gains ground against you.

Prayer

Prayer is a fantastic behavior that many people find great comfort in. Like other behaviors, there is no “right” or “wrong” way to pray.

Ask for some advice from your religious or spiritual leader if the process feels new or uncomfortable to you. Otherwise, find what is comfortable and feels rewarding.

Find Peace

This is a more open-ended behavior that you can accomplish many different ways. Finding peace means reaching a state of mind that is quiet, calm and soothing. Some achieve this state through prayer while others seek other opportunities.

Being alone, listening to inspirational or thought-provoking music or simply paying attention to your own breath provides a sense of peace. Lupus works to create a war inside you making peace even more valuable.

Appreciate Nature

Whether you identify yourself as religious or spiritual, there is something amazing about being in nature. Looking at the same four walls can make you feel trapped and bring about depression. Exploring what the world has to other can make your issues seem insignificant in the vastness of outdoors. Many find this freeing.

Laugh

There is something indescribable about the act of laughing. As a behavior, you already know its psychological benefit, but it can do more.

Laughing, especially in groups, empowers a connection between you and the others sharing your experience. Connection to others is a vital part of spirituality and religion.