Helpful Tips for Getting Through College With Lupus

by ANNA SCANLON

College With Lupus

Managing university when you have lupus can be an extreme challenge — and even that is kind of an understatement.

I made it through my university career with lupus and though it wasn't easy at all, it was doable. So doable, in fact, that I ended up getting two masters degrees and I'm now pursuing a PhD on top of it. I guess I am kind of a glutton for punishment.

As part of my PhD, I sometimes teach students and have had chronically ill students in my courses. So, as someone who has been there and done that (and purchased many university t-shirts) I have a few tips for helping you stay on top of your work and college life when lupus is in the mix, from the perspective of both teacher and student.

Keep Communication Lines Open

Don't go into a class and hide your condition because you're embarrassed. Your lupus may not be something you want to shout from the rooftops, but it is better to disclose early than let it become a problem later on in class.

Most teachers and professors are understanding about things like this, as long as you're able to get the work done, but telling them early is important. Excuses begin rolling in near a due date, and even if yours is legit it will be overshadowed by all of the others coming in.

It is easy for a teacher to be less sympathetic when they've already dealt with eight other people with "grandmothers in the hospital" or "a two-week case of food poisoning."

I have always been much more accommodating to my students who reveal they are having family difficulties or health struggles early on in the course, or when these issues appear. If a student tells me after a test has already been graded that they are battling an illness or something else is happening in their personal life, it is unfair to make concessions for them — no one else was granted leniency or a second chance.

But if he or she is upfront with me about what is going on, I'm always willing to give extensions or help in any way I can. Teachers are only human, and they can't help you if they don't know what is going on.

Don't Bite Off More Than You Can Chew

If you're returning to school after a lupus flare-up or are newly diagnosed and quite ill, it may be a good idea not to take a full load of classes. As lenient as teachers can be about deadlines and absences, you also won't be able to pass a class if you can't keep up with the work.

Don’t stress yourself out to the point that you become sick again, making you have to either take an incomplete or drop out altogether. I often took less than a full load to accommodate my extreme fatigue, and then would take one or two classes over the summer to keep up with my classmates. This allowed me to catch up on my sleep and not over extend my reach.

As a teacher, I have also had students who have, regrettably, had to drop out of my courses when it became apparent that they were too ill to handle the workload. With the sheer expense of college, you definitely want to avoid that if you can!

Keep a Schedule

One thing that always kept me sane in school was to keep a schedule of when I was going to study. I would block of hours in the day and either go to the library or study on my own, but I knew those hours or days would be totally dedicated to getting work done.

If I needed to rest at some point, I would always take a nap or close my eyes for a bit, which really helped keep me going. Scheduling ahead also prevented me from freaking out at the last minute, which can, of course, make your lupus even worse.

A schedule will make it clear when you should be working.

Get Plenty of Rest

In college, especially if you are living in a dorm, it can be super tempting to make sleep your last priority. Don’t fall prey to this trap.

Instead, make sleep one of your biggest priorities. When you are sleeping, your body is using more energy toward healing and restoring itself, which is part of the reason why (though not the entire, complex reason) lupus patients are sleepier than most.

Keeping good sleep hygiene will help you get through the day feeling refreshed and will keep you from getting sick too often.

If you have to and can afford it, a single dorm room may be the way to go. Although these are less sociable, it does mean you don’t have to worry about a roommate coming in and knocking things around while you’re trying to sleep.

If you are in a dorm you can still be social with everyone else in the building, but a room to yourself means you can be sure your sleep is dictated by you, and you alone.

Schedule in Time for Fun

Fun is an integral part of the college experience and shouldn’t be ignored just because you have lupus. Focusing only on schoolwork can lead to more stress (and more flares) and make you an all around depressed human being.

Even if you are a mature student, always take time to get involved in extracurricular activities so that you can have something to look forward to besides your studies. Find a club or society that coincides with your interests and go out and have fun and make friends. Just make sure you keep up with your studies as you do so.

Keep Drinking to a Minimum

I wrote an article for NewLifeOutlook on lupus and drinking, which is very helpful for college students. Basically, it emphasizes that drinking too much can cause your medication to work in overdrive, making you act drunk a lot

quicker than you are.

This can be dangerous if you are unaware of your surroundings or with people you don’t know very well. Don’t give in to peer pressure and keep your drinking to a minimum. This doesn’t mean you can never indulge, but try not to go overboard.