



How To Stop Apologizing For Being Chronically Ill

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“Please don’t be mad!” “I’m really sorry!” “I can’t make it again; I really don’t feel well.” How often have you made these or similar statements when you were too unwell to attend a planned event or a holiday with family or friends? If you are like most people with a chronic illness, it is often! But, why should you feel the need to apologize for being sick if it’s not something you can control? And how do you stop apologizing?

The Why Is Simple: Guilt!

As if chronic illness isn’t hard enough, many also cope with chronic guilt over being sick. That’s not to say all patients feel guilty about the same things; however, there is a commonality to their feelings. Some experience feelings of guilt because they believe they are a physical or financial burden to their loved ones. Others feel they are a failure when they must call in sick to work or when they have to cancel plans. And still others feel guilty they can’t control their illness and blame themselves for being sick. Unfortunately, feelings of guilt and even shame about being sick are frequently magnified by a person’s family, friends and coworkers when they say things such as, “You are canceling again?” or “You don’t look sick!”

While shame is not a healthy emotion, it is a normal feeling that all people experience at some point in their lives. Shame is usually triggered by something a person has done or not done that they had control over such as failing a test or drinking too much at a party. But for people with a chronic illness, shame is caused by something they can’t control. Author Susan Sontag’s groundbreaking book *Illness as Metaphor* provides some answers about why people feel guilty and shameful about being sick. She explains that throughout history, illness has been stigmatized. In the past, it was a commonly held notion that illness was a character flaw or a punishment for some behavior. Sontag points out that these societal views are internalized by patients, often creating shame and guilt. Besides being detrimental to a person’s mental health, these feelings can lead to poorer health outcomes when the person avoids seeking care or denies being sick.

How to Stop Apologizing Is the Harder Part

Getting past feelings of guilt isn’t easy! The first thing you need to do is stop saying “I’m sorry” for things you can’t control. An apology implies you’ve done something inherently wrong and are seeking forgiveness. You do not need to be forgiven for being sick. If you must cancel plans with friends or family, chances are you are more upset about it than they are.

If they are troubled about you canceling, it is probably because they don’t understand your illness. This is especially true if you have a rare or invisible illness. It’s easy for people to understand diseases they have heard of such as cancer or diabetes. But, it’s not as easy to appreciate the unknown. Offer to talk with them about your illness. When you meet, bring a few articles about your disease, and be clear about what you need from them. It’s easy to assume they know what you need or to not speak up. So, it’s important to communicate your needs as directly as you can.

Most of the time, your friends and family will really want to help you. If they care, they will accept you as you are and find ways to spend time with you that work for you!

Know When to Walk Away

Remember, you are the most important person in your life. No matter how much you love someone, if that person can't accept your limitations or they make you feel bad about being sick, it is time to walk away. Toxic relationships can make you feel worse, cause flare-ups and can be damaging to your mental health. It is not worth your health or well-being to hold onto someone who doesn't care about you.

Say 'Thank You' Instead of 'I'm Sorry'

One of the hardest consequences of having a chronic illness is losing your independence. It is embarrassing to be physically and/or financially dependent on loved ones. This embarrassment stems from feeling like a burden, so the ill person continually apologizes for needing help. An excellent way to stop this is to change the narrative you tell yourself about your illness. Saying "I'm sorry" implies you are at fault, whereas saying "thank you" is about appreciating the people helping you. In addition, research shows that by saying "thank you" instead of "sorry," your conversations help boost the self-esteem and satisfaction of the people on the receiving end of your words. This makes "thank you" better not only for you but for those around you.

Be Kind to Yourself

Getting diagnosed with a chronic illness takes a toll on the body, mind and spirit. Besides the physical suffering, people experience a mixture of emotions such as sadness, anxiety, confusion, exhaustion and fear. Unfortunately, chronically ill patients are often their own worst enemy when it comes to accepting the changes illness brings into their lives. Patients tell themselves they can do everything they did before. But this is an impossible standard to maintain along with caring for themselves. Self-compassion is a crucial part of your treatment plan. Your family and friends will look at how you treat yourself as a guide to how you should be treated by them. This means it's OK not to be perfect and to say "no" when you are experiencing pain or illness. One of the most important things you can do for yourself is never to side with others against yourself no matter what they say to you. Comments such as "You don't look sick!" or "You are too young to be sick!" reflect their ignorance! Don't take those comments personally. Trust your own judgment, and remember, you are not defined by your illness.

Reach Out to Others

One of the best ways to stop feeling like you need to apologize for being sick is to reach out to other people. Many times, patients don't want to talk to their loved ones about their experiences. Talking to people who have the same illness and sharing your feelings can help you cope with your own illness and give you insights about how to care for yourself. There are many online support groups. The best ways to find one in your area or for your specific disease is to go through the national chapter or to locate one on Facebook. Join a support group. You won't regret it.

Besides connecting through support groups, consider writing about your illness. Writing can be a great way to teach others about your illness, especially those who might not otherwise understand. It gives people in your life an opportunity to better relate to what you are going through. When they understand your condition, you will need to say "no" a lot less!