Using the Spoon Theory to Connect, Educate and Understand

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Explaining Chronic Pain With Cutlery

Have you heard about the spoon theory? Do you know what a spoonie is? These are relatively new terms to the chronic pain community, but they might be just what you need to help you explain your condition and build the support network you're looking for.

What Is the Spoon Theory?

The spoon theory was first mentioned in 2010 by Christine Miserandino, a teenager suffering from lupus who was in search of a metaphor to help her explain her pain to her best friend.

The story goes that Christine was having lunch in a diner, popping pain pills whilst she ate and carrying on living life in the only way she knew how. When her friend asked her what it felt like to have lupus, Christine immediately turned to medical definitions and her go-to frequent phrases to describe the pain. However, her friend already knew all of that and so asked her, "But what does it feel like? *Really* feel like?"

It's at this moment that Christine says the spoon theory was born. She grabbed a pile of spoons from across the tables and gave them to her friend. Christine said that a healthy person wakes up every day with an unlimited number of spoons, but a person with chronic illness gets only a limited number.

She asked her friend to count the spoons (there were 12) and then talk through her daily tasks. Every time she completed a task that required any energy or effort, her friend lost a spoon.

Washing her hair lost a spoon, getting dressed lost a spoon, making breakfast lost a spoon, getting on the bus lost a spoon — two or three if she had to stand. When Christine's friend realized she had already used half her spoons and she wasn't even at work, she began to realize the value of each spoon and the importance of trying to use as few as possible.

She began to experience the fear. How was she going to last the whole day with only six spoons left?

You can read Christine's story in full here.

How Does This Theory Help?

Spoon theory has grown since 2010 and people all over the world are using it as the metaphor that perfectly describes their pain, fatigue and approach to surviving each day. At its most basic level, spoon theory can help you to answer that dreaded question: "What does it feel like to have fibromyalgia?"

But spoon theory can do much more than that; it can give you a community. I doubt Christine knew that day in the diner just how far her metaphor would stretch, but there is now a group of spoon-related terms for us and our

suffering.

For a start, if you suffer from chronic illness, you're a spoonie. You can find other spoonies all over the internet, each of us identifying ourselves with this term and looking for other spoonies to communicate with. There are hashtags used on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram that allow you to link up with other spoonies — good ones include #SpoonieChat #SpoonieProblems and #SpoonieLife, but there are hundreds more.

There's also a weird feeling of comfort and pride that comes from being part of a community as positive and welcoming as the spoonies. All you need to do is tweet, "Moving house today — need more spoons!" and your fellow supporters will be full of love and kind words to help you through the day. It's like a secret code language that, as silly as it may seem to others, describes our emotions perfectly.

The benefit of embracing spoon theory isn't just about your connection to other people though, it's about you as well. Since I learned about spoon theory, I've started trying to think about how I manage my own activities in relation to the number of spoons I have at the start of each day.

For example, if I have to catch the train to work instead of driving I know it will use up an extra spoon. So where am I going to save a spoon? Well, I'm going to try to reduce the number of meetings I have at work and keep my evening completely free in the hope I can last the day. And so it goes on, each activity taking up a piece of the small amount of energy you started with.

Does spoon theory work for you? Have you found your condition easier to cope with since you became a spoonie?