

# Student life

**Anthony McGuire** describes what he has learnt about managing arthritis at university

**B**eing diagnosed with arthritis was a hard pill to swallow for an eight-year-old. I've spent several summers as an inpatient but I've had a good taste of normality too. I struggled a lot with accepting "the luck of the draw" during my teenage years and I tried to keep up with my socialite friends, often to my own detriment. The thought of being left out of plans due to swollen joints, aching muscles or a stiff neck irritated me, so I did my best to live for the moment.

When I arrived at university with my own identity, I was well equipped to deal with any number of scenarios but I wasn't prepared for the volume of human traffic. Life at school left me feeling my arthritis made me stick out like a sore thumb, so there were benefits to playing it down. I happily disappeared into the student crowd but I made the decision to talk openly about my circumstances.

Discussing arthritis with new friends was a hit-or-miss experience. I worried a lot about being labelled "sick", instead of being recognised and accepted for my achievements and character. It took light re-education. If I was having a bad day, I explained that instead of feeling sympathetic, I needed them to understand my fluctuating physical limitations and we worked out compromises together.

I find there's a big difference between sympathy and understanding. Over time people naturally run out of sympathy and begin to get impatient and frustrated, but by teaching them to understand the nature of arthritis, they began to see the erratic day-to-day changes in your body. Sometimes, I cancelled plans three days running and if someone doesn't understand the biology, fair reasons can be misconstrued as dismissive excuses. A bad day can take me a week to recover from.

My meds were forever changing and my tolerance for alcohol changed with them. Sometimes I could keep up and other times I felt nauseous at the very thought of a drink. I knew that alcohol featured fairly heavily in student life. I like the odd pint, but generally speaking alcohol isn't for me.

I find it important to keep close friends in the loop, but they've learned through experiencing the highs and the lows with me and we've all become closer as a result. I'm comforted by people taking an interest or making the call to step in and help me out. I like to

think I can do it all but there are occasions I need help and it's good to have an extra set of hands to save me from piercing a hole in the bleach bottle or sawing a can of beans in half (again).

I depended on my family at uni and they encouraged me to talk openly about my pain. Friends had their questions too, allowing them to build up their own profile of living with arthritis. Keeping quiet wasn't good for anyone.

The whirr of student life gave me the daily excuse to push my boundaries and get the most out of my course. Zoology offered plenty of field trip opportunities to Loch Lomond and boat trips around the islands.

Attendance meant planning ahead to avoid aggravating my arthritis in the days leading up to each trip. Preparation is the key to doing everything you want to do. Even if I tried to be clever and think ahead, my friends could still witness how quickly a good time could turn into an arthritic nightmare after the most trivial of tasks.

Glasgow University's Student Disability Service was a huge crutch during my time as a student. I was offered everything from a lightweight laptop, speech recognition software, a scribe and a computer in my exams. They talked me through lift locations and informed my lecturers about my arthritis, so I felt like I was on equal pegging with the rest of my class. They worked hard to maintain that equality for the duration of my course.

Having graduated from the uni dream, I've learned not to let arthritis dictate my life – and eventually I have the balance right between rest and play. For everything I've struggled to cope with physically, I want to accomplish something with my brain. It didn't take long to realise the importance of making the best of every opportunity that came my way. **an**



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