

Living with IBD: Making the Most of Your High School Experience

High school is one of the big milestones in our lives, and the experiences we have can have a huge impact on the rest of our lives. Before we even fill out our course selections for high school, we already have preconceived ideas about what we will encounter. Surely there will be cafeteria food, the popular clique, student government, athletic teams, academics, friends, dating and so much more. **But now, instead of just a backpack and pencils, you have to bring your disease to school.** How can you merge your new challenges with your dreams?

What makes having IBD even harder is that you have an exteriorly invisible, intestinal disease. Chances are, it's not going to be the most popular subject in a room of teens to discuss bloody bowel movements nor will it be easy to explain the disease when you have to dart to the bathroom. How do you balance your social image with empathy towards your illness?

First of all, be honest. No one is going to get mad at you for having a disease, but friends and teachers might be disappointed that you didn't let them help you. This certainly doesn't mean you have to announce it on the PA system or introduce yourself like "Hi, I'm Sam and I have inflammatory bowel disease (IBD)."

Secondly, you need to be organized and have a concrete plan to make sure you graduate on time. Blissful ignorance is not all that practical. Let's face it; you're not like all your peers. You will go through some difficult times and need to be prepared. Consider signing up for courses that won't be too stressful if stress is a trigger and shortlist emergency courses so if you had to pull out of your original courses, you would still have the appropriate credits to graduate. Although it can be nice to stick our heads in the sand, at the end of the day it is much more comforting to know you have a plan in place.

Third, try to be proactive. Of course, you can't predict your next flare up any more than you can predict what your

TIPS FROM STUDENTS:

Tell your administration about your disease. There might be a special nurses' bathroom you can use when you are sick or an elevator pass when you are too exhausted for the stairs.

Talk to your guidance counselors. They may be able to help you pick less demanding courses, empathetic teachers and fantastic advocates.

Talk to your teachers. You don't need to declare that you have IBD in front of the class; try to set up a time to talk privately with your teachers.

Authority figures might be intimidating so come prepared. Arm yourself with IBD brochures and information from your doctor, including a doctor's note.

You can be a great advocate for yourself. If classmates ask why you miss school or leave class all the time, decide what you want to say. If you're comfortable talking about your disease, go for it. If you are uneasy, just say you'd rather not talk about it but appreciate their concern.

teacher is going to wear tomorrow. But if you sense you are getting sick or know you are going in for treatment or anything of the sort, let your teachers know. You can play an active role in being an EDUCATOR. Speak with your teachers and discuss how they can help you prepare for difficult times. They will respect you tremendously for helping them to understand what you are going through.

- Offer to speak to staff on a PD Day to give them your perspective on living with a chronic disease.
- Teachers and other students can help get together work while you are away. Teachers have well planned lessons and if you predict that you are going to be away for a substantial period of time, they can most likely give you the lessons and homework in advance. At the time it might seem like it's easier to forget about it, but when you get back to school, the flood of work can set back your recovery tremendously.
- Set up a buddy system with your classmates to get notes and assignments when you miss school. Assign a note-taker if you find it challenging to write quickly.
- Exam time is stressful for the average student, but it's even more pronounced when you're worried about your IBD or you're just rebounding from a flare up. Your school can offer you alternate exam dates or the possibility of taking your exam in a different room or with longer time.
- Ask for help in advance. By the time exam schedules move around it might be too late. So when do you ask? At the beginning of the course, a few months before exams. It doesn't have to be the first second of your course but definitely before the day of the exam.
- Don't be embarrassed by your condition and ask for help when it's needed. It doesn't make you a weaker person.
- When you miss class, most schools want a doctor's note. Chances are your GI has a school note on file that they can just fill in with your name and the date. For times when you don't have an appointment and you're just sick at home, your GI or your GP can usually still write a note for you.
- Some schools have special codes so you can get a medical marker on your file. For that you might need a doctor's note, but it's usually very painless in the application process. Even if you don't have symptoms, having a plan in place is great. When you have a plan in place, it can help ease the school angst when unplanned disease happens.

Don't be consumed by your disease. While IBD is part of who you are, it doesn't define who you are. You still have interests and dreams.

So – can you bring your IBD to school? For sure, it can take some adjustment but there's absolutely no reason why your high school career can't be as fulfilling as you've ever envisioned. Changing your dreams doesn't make them any less valuable. Our dreams naturally change regardless of disease. At the end of the day, you've got to take a deep breath, smile and trust in your abilities.

Let yourself be a teenager – get involved in the clubs and teams that you want to - keeping in mind the reality of your symptoms. Don't try to be a superhero (Super BM is not a very catchy name),

Having a disease can suck – you're entitled to feeling sad and having bad days. You need to give yourself permission to be sick when you're sick. Pushing yourself too hard can make your situation worse.

Don't use your IBD as an excuse - if you constantly label yourself as the sick kid, no one else is going to change that label. Talk to friends and family about your feelings. It is not your fault you are sick, but it's your responsibility to take care of yourself.

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