

A Nap on the Couch: Frivolity or Necessity?

Last week, I did something I haven't done in a very long time. I purposefully lay down on the couch, pulled my cozy comforter over me, and with Holly curled up on the floor beneath me, I surrendered to a deep, twenty minute nap.

Normally, when I'm tired I go to bed, but this nap on the couch was something entirely different. It was both luxurious and refreshing. It almost felt illicit.

What good is twenty minutes when you have a list of jobs that are piling up faster than the laundry basket fills up after a weekend of visitors?

It was twenty minutes when I didn't eat junk food - an old, misguided habit – I would eat something sweet to get that pick-me-up, when in fact, it was rest I was craving, not sweets.

It was twenty minutes when I didn't gawk at the computer screen, like some sort of bystander on the highway of smashed-up words and broken-down ideas that were on their way to becoming a vehicle of inspiration.

It was twenty minutes of time that allowed me to recapture that feeling from a time when life was very different for me. I was a new teacher, working in Northern Manitoba. Pretty much most afternoons, in those early-to-get-dark winter days, I would make my home, and stretch out for a restorative nap in the dwindling light of the day. It wasn't a long one, but it certainly was a satisfying one. That couch was made for napping, unlike the one we now have. After awakening, I would prepare dinner, work on lesson plans, do

some correcting, then head out for the 9 p.m. swim. Afterward, a group of us would meet up for coffee, then I would head home to bed.

In case you're wondering, at that point in my life, I had been living with rheumatoid arthritis for five years. The medication I was on was working for me – I could teach, exercise and socialize. The routine I had developed was the one that allowed me to take an active part in my life. Sure, I was tired, but that nap was an integral part of my daily life, as much a necessity as the medication, my work, exercise and socializing.

But, here's the thing, when your disease is active, when inflammation and pain punctures holes in your life raft, staying afloat becomes increasingly more of a challenge. Consciously, or unconsciously, because of, or in spite of your medical condition, you get good at subtraction - friends and family visits are curtailed, exercise evaporates, nutrition is a word starved of meaning, and you receive a DUI for your impaired sleep.

But, the sum of who you are is much greater than all that was *BD* – *Before Diagnosis*.

Undeniably, the nourishing of your *heartmindbody* (since it's all connected, I consider this to be one word), is important for everyone; however, it is essential for those who live with a chronic, debilitating disease, such as rheumatoid arthritis. It may mean making some hard choices in regard to a treatment plan, energy deployment, time management, family commitments, to name a few. You learn to deal with the realities of what you can do, then dwell in the possibilities of what can still be done.

Rheumatoid arthritis can affect the quality of your sleep – how quickly you fall asleep, how long you stay asleep, and how refreshed you feel when you awaken. When under the influence of RA, it's like drinking a distasteful cocktail that is mixed with unequal parts of pain, stress, habit, diet, and drugs.

To improve your sleep hygiene, you may need to make some changes, including if, when, and how you nap. Bear in mind, that if your nap is counted by hours, rather than minutes, you can impact your ability to sleep well at night. You'll have to experiment to see what works best for you.

A nap on the couch – it's so much more than a frivolous way to spend twenty minutes, wouldn't you agree?

Note: This article originally appeared on RA hub on HealthCentral.com in 2016.