Coping with a Chronic Illness and Overcoming Doubts about College

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Students who have a chronic disease such as arthritis, lupus, lyme disease, chronic fatigue, epilepsy, cancer, asthma, Crohn’s disease, and sickle cell anemia may have concerns about applying to college.

Can I really do this?

Yes. If you have made it through high school with your illness, then you will be able to tackle college. By now you've figured out how to cope with your disease and maximize your learning. These are skills that you will continue to apply not only in college, but throughout your life.

What kind of school can I go to?

Everyone has specific attributes that they look for in a college. Some of these are optional characteristics; some of these are make-or-break criterion. The list is different for each student. A vegetarian or someone who keeps kosher will require a certain type of dining facility. An aspiring crew athlete will not likely choose a landlocked school. Similarly, a student requiring close proximity to a hospital or to a medical specialist will include those things on their list of vital attributes.

Making a good decision requires that you do your homework. First, you need to identify the things that you require in a potential school. You should consider the size, the location, the atmosphere, etc. You'll also want to talk to your physician to see about any additional needs that you will have while away at school.

Once you have an idea about what you are looking for, with the help of your guidance counselor and/or independent educational consultant, college guide books and the internet, investigate which schools fit who you are as an individual and a learner. Make a list of likely possibilities. Then, whenever possible, visit the schools that you are most interested in. In addition to the information session and the tour, visit the campus health center. Find out about the hours, who you can talk to if you have questions or concerns, if there is a health care provider who has experience with your disease, are there any support groups on campus or anything else that you think might be relevant. Visit the medical center or hospital closest to campus and find out about the programs and resources they have. Ask all of your questions. The more information you have, the easier it will be to make a good decision.

It is up to you to decide if and when, during the admission process, you want to talk with an admissions representative about your disease. This can be a complex question. Your college
counselor and physician may help you decide. Admissions officers generally welcome this information. Sometimes you can informally talk to a college representative to discuss any dietary needs, housing, transportation to the nearest medical center, or any other support needs.

**Can I handle classes?**

Chances are that by now you've learned how to cope with your illness in the classroom. If you have a system that works for you, stick with it. Again, talking to people about your disease is a personal decision. That said, there can be advantages to alerting your dean, advisor and professors. If your condition might periodically affect your ability to learn due to pain, treatment, or fatigue, your dean or advisor can help you plan and balance your four years by optimally distributing courses that are demanding. Also, should a situation arise in which you are prevented from taking an exam or completing an assignment, having an informed dean step in to help arrange a make-up exam or extension can make life a lot easier. If such a situation is likely, don't wait until it arises to tell the people who can help you.

**Can I handle the social life?**

Most high school seniors are concerned about their social transition to college. They worry about whether they will be accepted. Will their roommates hate them because of the way they look, because of their race, because of where they are from, because they are republicans? It's perfectly normal to worry about these things, and to be concerned about how your illness will affect your social life. Again, the choice to tell your friends and roommates is yours. However, if it is something that you would have difficulty hiding, it might be easier to tell people right from the start. Be prepared for your friends not to know much about your disease and the implications it has. This ignorance can breed fear and pity. Some people tend to stay away from what they do not understand. One way to handle this is to explain your disease. Many disease-specific support organizations provide pamphlets, lists of FAQ's and other information that can be helpful. For example, The Children's Diabetes Foundation provides a letter and a fact sheet to help college bound students talk to their roommates. Ask your physician how he or she would explain your illness. Talking openly about why smoking in your room can be harmful, the stash of food you need that no one can touch, or the need to keep dorm clutter to a minimum will help you to foster a positive relationship with your peers. Students with certain illnesses do not have a choice; their roommates need to be aware of triggers, needs, and what to do in case of an emergency.

When you visit campuses, see if you can arrange to stay overnight with a student. This will give you a real taste about what the social scene is like. You will want to consider how sleep deprivation and alcohol will affect your condition. It might be that living with a roommate really isn't a good idea.

As you go through the process, remember that your initial decisions are not permanent. If having a roommate doesn't work out, the situation can always be changed. If you choose the wrong class, you will likely be able to drop it. None of these is the end of the world.
The most important thing to keep in mind is that there are a number of colleges where you can be successful and happy. Don't stress. You succeeded in high school despite your disease. You will similarly succeed in college.

**About the Author**

*Marilyn G. S. Emerson, MSW, is President and founder of College Planning Services, Inc. an independent educational consulting firm in New York that specializes in college admission counseling. She is a member of IECA, NACAC and HECA. Marilyn continues to visit college campuses each year and is willing to travel to meet with clients. Visit www.collplan.com.*