

The Strong One



I nurtured a persona and the belief that I was strong. I failed to show vulnerability and worked to very high standards and performed in the highest of pressure. I met professional goals and managed life fairly well. I was The Strong One... until I wasn't.

About a year ago, I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. While I knew that something was wrong, I never imagined it could be anything as life altering as MS. In one conversation with a neurologist, I felt that my life was over. Oddly enough, people counted on me to do what I've always done. My loved ones waited patiently for me to activate my best skills to fight this challenge, as I have fought all other challenges. But I had nothing. No desire, no will, no interest in going to battle with multiple sclerosis. I was so sick, physically and mentally, I could not think rationally about MS. I felt alone and scared about my future.

There was no fight in me, and I wanted to give up. I was confused about who I was because I knew I wasn't the same. I felt lesser abled, undependable, broken and weak. I had no idea who I was without the things that made me, well, me. I wasn't interested in soliciting or receiving help from anyone.

About 6 months into the diagnosis, relief began to take shape when I finally admitted to my PCP that I was drowning in despair, depression and defeat. This admission led to mental therapy, which helped me begin to process the transition that multiple sclerosis brings.

Therapy helped me understand that being vulnerable is a form of strength, and it helped to clear my mind of the confusion that was haunting me. But mostly, it helped me to understand

that I was heartbroken and that it was okay to grieve. That despite, who I am to others, in that moment and for however long it took, it was okay to just breathe.

So here are three things perhaps you, also The Strong One, need to hear...

1. Vulnerability is a necessary skill

It's so easy to get stuck in the pattern of see-a-problem, fix-a-problem. Or better yet, it's easy to nurture relationships where you are the fixer, the strong confident person that people rely on for protection, correction and guidance. And while all of that is happening, you, The Strong One, while taking care of others, fail to sharpen your own vulnerability. You submit to life as is and create an environment of supporting of others. And when the time comes to receive support, you, The Strong One, does not know how to ask or receive support.

2. You're not invincible

Seems simple enough because no human is. But there's something about being the human representation of strength that makes you and others think that whatever life throws at you, you can defeat it. Unfortunately, strength is finite, and there may come a point when life throws something so hard, so unexpected and so unpredictable, it strips you of everything you know to be true about yourself. The characteristics and tactics others rely on you for strength? None of it works, and you're left trying to figure out who you are without your strength.

3. Leave something for yourself

Your identity is wrapped up in how you serve others - how you are the problem solver, the fixer, the person who gets it done. However, being strong does not exempt any one person from personal trials and defeats. Most of the Strong Ones find a way to overcome almost all obstacles and repair or restore things back to their normal state. But there are some things, like a chronic illness, that simply cannot be fixed, and when that time comes for you to pull from within, there has to be something left inside of you to help you fight your own challenge.