

For a type-A athlete, a new normal



After my MS diagnosis, I'm learning to slow down.

by Katie Klingsporn



Katie Klingsporn enjoys hikes and day trips with her husband and dog. Photo courtesy of Katie Klingsporn

When I moved to the ski town of Telluride, Colorado, at the age of 24, it was under the guise of finding work at the local newspaper. But really, I moved to Telluride for the rugged San Juan Mountains that knifed the sky, the sprawling canyonlands of the Colorado Plateau nearby and the endless adventures that lay waiting in these wrinkled landscapes.

And for nearly a decade, I plied these adventures by bike, foot and snowboard, happily falling in with the hard-charging ranks of Telluride. Like most mountain towns, Telluride's outdoor culture reflects its landscape—exacting and extreme. Here, the expectations for work and play are outsized, every other person is an elite athlete and badges of honor are earned through punishing physical feats in the mountains. It's common for people to ski laps in the backcountry before going to work, spend weekends bagging 14,000-foot peaks and routinely complete epic suffer-fest bike rides.

As a lifelong athlete, I dove in to this work-hard-play-harder-sleep-when-you-die lifestyle with relish. I worked long, deadline-driven days at the paper, and then stuffed the rest of my time with early morning bike rides, laps on the ski slope, difficult yoga classes, steep hikes through the aspen groves and weekend excursions to the desert. I was always on the move, and considered restful activities like naps and massages terrible wastes of time. I felt the harder I pushed myself, the better I would be. I lived by rigorous to-do lists, considered seven hours of sleep sufficient and rarely took a day off from working out.

Knocked flat by diagnosis

I burned and burned, my identity becoming inextricable with pushing my body to extremes. I won some races and built a reputation as an athlete who could keep up with the guys, a hardy mountain denizen.

That all came crashing down in March 2015. That's when, a couple days after taking a tumble at the ski resort, my torso went numb. Soon after, I was visited by a host of terrifying symptoms: tingly hands that could no longer perform nimble tasks, random bouts of itching, a current of electricity dancing under my skin, a constriction around my middle. After an ER visit, two MRIs and a spinal tap, I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

The diagnosis knocked me flat. And instead of jumping back to my feet like I always had before, this time the best I could do was crawl.

So I started small, with an activity I had previously discounted as yawn-inducing: walking. One mile here, then two. Mellow yoga with words like “restorative” in the class title was next. I began meditating. I even adopted a new mantra that would have appalled the previous me: Do less.

It was all I could do, but it was enough.

And as counterintuitive as it was, once I put this mantra into place, I realized I had been crashing through life at a reckless pace. I had been too busy piling on activities to enjoy engaging conversations, to notice the songs of birds in the forests, or to bask in the pleasure of lying under a tree with nowhere to be. And by refusing to practice self-care, I had beat up my body when I thought I was caring for it.

Staying slow

Over time and with plenty of rest, the symptoms calmed down to a low hum.

And I did get back on my bike and snowboard. But when I pushed myself—be it on an exhausting ride, overcommitted social schedule or hectic workweek—I paid for it with fatigue, headaches and vision problems.

So I've learned to stay slow. These days, I spend more time wandering along the backyard trail than going on bike rides in the alpine. I sleep in on weekends, nap when I'm tired and draft much less ambitious to-do lists.

I can no longer define myself as the badass mountain biker and snowboarder I was at 28. My Instagram posts no longer depict epic days in the mountains, my weekends are no longer stuffed with high-flying adventures. Instead, accomplishments are measured by hikes with the dog, day trips to the desert with my husband and road rides along rolling country lanes.

This is my new normal. Achieving it has required patience, self-acceptance and a pointed effort to stop comparing the new me with the old. But I've emerged more mindful, deliberate and grateful for the small wonders. The ones I was rushing through life too fast to notice before.

Katie Klingsporn lives in southwestern Colorado with her husband, daughter, dog and three chickens.

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