

Teaching with a hidden disability

by Adrienne Kitchin, Professor, School of Liberal Arts and Sciences

In the last edition of Newsbreak, John Steckley wrote about the nature of hidden disabilities. He discussed his wife's experience with a condition called fibromyalgia. Fibromyalgia is an often debilitating syndrome that casts its net across a wide array of symptoms. Pain, extreme fatigue along with cognitive and sleep disruptions are common and there are many other possible specific symptoms, depending on the person. This clustered effect is one of the reasons why fibromyalgia is so difficult to treat. Statistically, more women than men suffer from fibromyalgia and unfortunately, women's illnesses and complaints have often been discounted within the medical professions, to put it mildly. It took me several years to get a diagnosis, and after that, there really wasn't much in the way of treatment.

A further complication of fibromyalgia is that there is no external tell-tale marker that would indicate to the outside world that a person is struggling with such a condition. This is, in part, what makes having fibromyalgia so tough. Mostly, I look perfectly healthy and capable and unless I disclose that I have this condition, no one would ever know. And sometimes, it's just embarrassing to tell a colleague that walking *all the way* to the Guelph-Humber building (I am a partial load faculty member) is truly something that I cannot do during my busy teaching day. Saying, "I am already at my absolute max with pain and exhaustion levels," is something that would be very difficult for me to say or explain to someone who has the best of intentions, perhaps even around something fun, like having a short visit or meeting for a cup of tea.

Teaching part-time is an excellent profession for managing fibromyalgia. I do not sit at a desk for eight hours straight, and I have the flexibility in my day to go to the gym, which is an effective and lasting option for pain management. When most physicians and rheumatologists are prescribing SSRIs and heavy pain medications, I can manage my pain through less invasive means. I wouldn't be able to negotiate this time

away from the office in another job that required me to do all of my work on site.

Teaching allows for me to do the preparation, marking and reading required of teaching on my own time and in an environment which is more suitable to the specific needs of someone with fibromyalgia. As part of my particular symptom cluster, I am photosensitive which makes working in an office with fluorescent lights difficult. Also, because of the cognitive issues, I need to do my planning and marking in an environment where I can control noise levels. Because of the pain, I need to be somewhere where I can move around, change my seating and periodically do stretches. I can easily do all of these things at home. Splitting my time between teaching at the college and doing the bulk of my work at home allows for me to be gainfully employed while still managing this condition. A sad reality for many people with fibromyalgia is that they cannot work due to the complexities of the pain and exhaustion levels.

That being said, I am sure most teachers will agree that teaching is physical work. It can sometimes involve long days, with little or no break between classes. It can also involve much energetic output, and in my case, I usually need at least a little break in between classes to breathe a bit and take a moment before I move to my next class.

Some resources available to partial load faculty have been helpful. As part of our benefits, we get coverage for extended health benefits, things like massage therapy and naturopathy.

Having a hidden disability has made me acutely aware of the many different things that teachers and students can be going through at any given time. These things may not be immediately visible. As a leader in the provision of support for our students, Humber College can be seen as an example among colleges. It would be great if the college would increase support for our incredibly dedicated and diligent part-time and partial load faculty members. 🦿