Being Thankful Despite a Migraine

by BARBARA LEECH

Enjoying Thanksgiving Despite Migraines

Confession: I have not planned my menu or even thought much about Thanksgiving Day yet. Migraine pain has simply been too much for me lately, and it is all I can do to simply get through what I must, never mind take on any extra tasks.

Honestly, I used to love all the planning involved with this holiday, from how to arrange all the chairs around my expanded dining room table, to designing a beautiful place setting, to choosing which appetizer I would create to please people until I revealed my beautiful turkey.

It was a symphony of activity I once enjoyed orchestrating. Now, not so much.

My migraines have been much more frequent and much more severe. There was a point this month where I worried I might have contracted meningitis because the pain was so extreme it felt like it very well could have killed me.

The First Step Is the Hardest

So this brings me to this moment, where I sit and count the number of days left until the holiday season officially begins. I have to say, the way my migraines have taken over, I am skeptical about keeping up with expectations.

There are many issues that make holidays more difficult when you have migraines. In Maine, where I live, the weather is a major challenge on the body, and I swear it can impact whether I get a migraine on any given day.

With so many migraines and so much to accomplish, I feel I am forgetting something important almost every day. Pain makes my brain function poorly, but so does medication.

Make Plans to Be Thankful

So today, I have a plan I will stick to in order to get through Thanksgiving and all the chaos about to ensue.

I will find courage and get the food shopping done, clean up as best I can, and cook this meal. I will muster up all my gratitude and be thankful.

If you suffer from chronic migraines, you can borrow my plan, and a bit of my courage if yours is lacking, and we can accomplish this together — and be thankful we did.

Count Your Blessings and Your Guests

There are always reasons to be thankful, even when you suffer from a chronic condition like migraine. Remember

to give thanks.

And remember to ask those people you are so thankful for to bring a side, or dessert, or something that would prove helpful to you for this meal. It's OK to ask for help, as long as you show gratitude for it.

Make a List and Check It Twice (or Three Times Because We Probably Forgot Something)

Create a complete list of what you need for your menu and who is bringing what to help you out. I call this my "save time and energy on duplicates" list. More than once I have gone through the effort of frantically making pie, when I should have remembered one of my guests was bringing two.

Make a To-Do List

This will serve as a guide you can check off when you get each item done. It can also serve as a go-to list you can share when someone offers to help and you can't think of anything for them to help with.

Next page: more tips for creating a stress- and trigger-free holiday for yourself and loved ones

Make a To-Do List

I don't know about you, but when offered help, my mind goes blank about what still needs to be done.

Shop When You Can When Stores Are Not Crowded

This is why the list will help. If you have a bit of energy after dropping off the kids at school, head to one store and cross the big things off your list. Basically, pace yourself and tackle that dreaded grocery shopping when the aisles are fairly empty.

Remember Food Is Not Really What the Holiday Is All About

Well maybe for some it is pretty important, but it is not everything. Keep a healthy perspective and remember what really matters: the people sitting around the table with you.

Don't Be Self-Conscious About Wearing Your Sunglasses

Rock those glasses even if it's cloudy or even in the grocery store! Those bright lights can be the perfect trigger to a migraine that is ready to happen.

Be Ready With Ice

Cryotherapy involves cold temperatures applied for relief of swelling and pain to the body, which essentially removes heat from a specific part of the body causing the pain. So, make sure you have ice packs ready for a sudden onset of migraine pain.

It is believed that during a migraine, the blood vessels inside the head dilate too much, causing pain. These vessels become swollen with blood, which puts pressure on the nerves surrounding the vessels.

Both heat and cooling therapies are often used as temperature manipulation to reduce migraine and headache pain. The use of cold therapy is believed to cause the swollen blood vessels to constrict back to near normal size, which in turn reduces the pressure and pain level of the migraine or headache pain.

Stay Clear of Food Triggers

Foods that typically trigger migraines may include those with nitrates (bacon, sandwich meats and hotdogs) and sulfates (wine and dried fruit). Fermented cheeses and excessive caffeine can also play a role.

Everyone is different so if it does not bother you, than by all means eat (or drink) up. But if every time you eat bacon you get a headache, you might try the all-natural, uncured, no nitrate version — or simply don't eat it.

Create a Sanctuary

My family can be loud. Very loud. The happier they are, the louder they seem to be. And turkey makes them happy.

Plan a place in your home where you can escape from the noise. Sometimes just knowing my bedroom is there, darkened and waiting if I need a 15-minute break from sound, is just enough to keep me going.

Above all else, do not push yourself into a major migraine attack or make the current one worse than it already is. Be good to yourself.

I send to you a gentle hug and beg you to take your time and do not stress over the holiday and all the cooking, cleaning and preparation that accompanies it. Value everything that is truly important, and that includes being as pain-free as your migraines allow you to be for the holidays.