Coping With a Lack of Migraine Understanding

by ERIC PATTERSON

Helping Others Towards Understanding Migraines

Other people can't see migraines. They will never feel the persistently pounding headaches or the nauseating way your stomach churns. They don't understand the way light blinds you or how disorienting your visual symptoms become. Other people can never grasp the entirely paralyzing nature of a migraine.

In most situations, this lack of understanding is fine and acceptable. They don't need to walk a mile in your shoes. You are OK with this because you would never want anyone to know how bad migraines feel.

On some occasions, though, you begin to experience problems sparked by the lack of understanding experienced by others. Their confusion and disbelief comes out in the form of ill-informed questions and statements including:

- How can you be so sick one day and fine the next?
- You must be doing something to cause your symptoms.
- Are you sure you are taking your medication the right way?
- If you just ate better and exercised, you wouldn't have any more migraines.
- Aren't you just making a mountain out of a molehill?
- You need to find a new doctor.

A frustrating theme about their perspectives is that they seem to blame you for your symptoms. Clearly, with questions and statements like these, the people in your life lack a true appreciation of what migraines are and how they operate.

Over time, this lack of acceptance will diminish the relationships you have with the disbelievers. Another risk is that you begin to doubt yourself and your experience. You may begin to agree with their flawed points-of-view and think that the migraines are your fault.

You have an important choice to make. You could either go on living life unchanged as you expose yourself to the risks of poor relationships or you can make a concerted effort to help people understand the signs, symptoms and effects of migraines. Hopefully, you see that the second choice is the only choice for you.

Next part: learn how to teach others.

Teach Yourself to Teach Them

People will never understand migraines the way that you do. Even someone else that has migraines may have a drastically different experience than you do. Learning as much as you can about your condition will empower you with information and permit you to better explain migraines to others. Here's how:

Know Your Symptoms

Before you can explain migraines to anyone else, you must be proficient at understanding them yourself. When did they first appear? What are your triggers? What intensity of symptoms do you experience? What is helpful for you when symptoms are bad?

Having a grasp of your patterns and trends allows you to build a familiarity with yourself. In turn, this makes you a better communicator to friends, family and professionals in your life.

Know Migraines

Learning and understanding the types of migraines is confusing and challenging. The International Headache Society developed and maintains a headache classification system. Currently, there are six different classifications of migraines. The list quickly balloons when you add multiple specifiers.

To complicate matters, many physicians continue using terms that the International Headache Society does not recognize. These include stress migraine, silent migraine, sinus migraine, ocular migraine, tension migraine and others. Seek out the best information to inform others.

Know the Statistics

Estimates state that 37 million Americans deal with migraines, and women make up 70% of migraine sufferers.

Migraine without aura is the most common as 66% of migraine sufferers identify with this type. Pain on one side of the head is common with 59% of people reporting that symptom. Throbbing pain occurs in 85% of people.

Sensitivity to sound in occurs in 76% of migraine sufferers. Sensitivity to light in 80% and nausea is reported in 73% of people.

These symptoms typically last for four to 72 hours. Migraine with aura comprises most of the other third of migraines. Some with this type of migraine report feeling no pain accompanying their visual symptoms.

Consider compiling facts relevant to your situation. Printing a brochure about migraines might be a good way to communicate this information to people in your life.

Know the Medications

Prescription abortive medications are taken at the first sign of migraine symptoms. The goal is to treat the symptoms and restore your level functioning for at least 24 hours. Prescription preventative medications are taken daily to stop migraines from beginning. A medication like this is especially helpful for women that have menstrual migraines because they can begin taking the prescription in the days leading up to their period to avoid symptoms.

Over-the-counter medications include Advil, Excedrin, Motrin and Tylenol. Natural Remedies are herbs, vitamins, roots or teas to treat migraines. Complementary and Alternative Medication (CAM) include acupuncture, chiropractic, yoga and hypnosis.

Share the Knowledge

Now that you have become a migraine expert, and you have sharpened your understanding of your own symptoms and struggles; you can pass the information along to the valued people in your life so they have a better understanding of how to help someone with a migraine. Communicating effectively will produce the best success. Here’s how:

Set Your Goal

Starting a conversation without a goal is like going sailing in a boat without a destination. You might wind up somewhere fun, but it would only be a coincidence. Think about the outcome you desire and what you can do to encourage success. Setting goals allows you to plan and prepare what you might say in a particular situation.

If you are only interested in providing information, focus on the facts. If you want the other people to grasp your struggle, share the personal, private thoughts and feelings. Remember, your goal should only center on yourself. It is not realistic to set a goal to change the thoughts, feelings or behaviors of the other person. Focus on you.

Lastly, never set a goal that involves being “right” or proving the other person “wrong.” No good can come from this.

Know Your Audience

Once you have a goal, think about the best way to achieve this result with your audience. Surely, you would speak to your grandmother in a different way than your boss at work. Your best friend would not appreciate being spoken to like a 10-year-old and your nephew would be confused by the full power of your limitless lexicon.

Some people respond well to humor while others require a more serious, formal discussion. For this reason, you will improve your chances for success by arranging times and places to have these conversations. Otherwise, you may be caught off-guard and respond reactivly. In situations like this, the conversation is less likely to be fruitful.

Stay Assertive

Assertive communication is always the best communication. If you are frustrated or annoyed by the lack of understanding other people present with, it may skew your communication to be more aggressive or passive.

Passive communication involves being quiet, guarded with disclosing your thoughts and feelings, being a pushover and caring more about others than yourself. Aggressive communication is usually loud and defensive. It will display a lack of respect towards others.

Assertive communication is more interested in facts, data and straightforward expression of thoughts, feelings and ideas. When in doubt with assertive communication, use an “I” statement like this: “I feel disappointed that you do not accept and understand my experience with migraines. I would appreciate you reading this information to learn more about the condition. Also, I would be happy to have a conversation with you about my symptoms and stressors.”

With crisp communication like that, the other person would be foolish to refuse.

Conclusion

The invisible nature of migraines naturally leads to some confusion on the topic. You didn’t sign up to be the spokesperson for any migraine association, but gaining information and effectively sharing it with the important people in your life is worth the effort. When you advocate for you, you advocate for everyone with migraines.