

## ■ OFF CAMPUS ■

# Keeping up with academics when you're AILING CHRONICALLY

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As someone who was not forced to balance their academics and health needs unless on the rare occasion I got sick before an exam, I have always sympathised with those who've had to go the extra mile for education due to their chronic illnesses.

A person with a chronic illness has to pay attention to symptoms, combat fatigue, and navigate the uncertainties of their health conditions while they work towards their academic pursuits. Therefore, prioritising one's physical and mental health becomes crucial when dealing with a chronic illness as the lack of it entails grave consequences.

"Every chronic illness is different, and the way it affects people also has a wide range. I'm currently diagnosed with undifferentiated spondyloarthritis or USpA in short. And to me, health always outranks my studies. If I maintain my health better, I can study better, even though I had the opposite mindset before I got my diagnosis. In the long run, it's beneficial for me to put my health first," says Nusaibah F. Yunus, an Economics major at North South University.

Students who suffer from chronic illnesses are required to identify and maintain the equilibrium between their mental well-being and their academic responsibilities. In such cases, finding moments of respite can be instrumental in recharging one's physical and emotional reserves, thus contributing to a more sustainable approach to academic endeavours.

"I will periodically take mental health days where I do nothing but sit on the couch and watch TV. I can't get anything done on that day but at least it ensures that I'm charged up for the next day," says Koushin Unber, a twelfth grader at Freedom High School in Orlando.

It's easy to get myopic when dealing with

academic struggles. As coursework and assignments tumble in on themselves, finishing the workload right before a deadline or an exam might feel extremely relieving. However, chronic illnesses constantly pose the threat of introducing unexpected challenges before an important deadline, the foresight to plan ahead becomes a crucial ally for students. This foresight not only acts as a preventive measure that reduces the impact of potential setbacks but also helps foster a sense of control over a student's academic trajectory.

"One thing that has helped me throughout the years is completing my work in advance. Since I can't predict the next episode of illness, completing my tasks when I'm well has helped me avoid a lot of unpleasant situations. But this isn't always possible. My contingency for such a situation like this is to weave in periods of rest during study sessions," says Rashad Rouf, a Data Analytics major at Asia Pacific University of Technology & Innovation in Kuala Lumpur.

Educational institutes also play an important role in the journey of a student struggling with chronic illnesses. There are instances in which institutions tend to downplay the severity of a health condition

and refuse to provide a student with necessary accommodation, which exacerbates the situation.

"Having alternate ways to verify the illnesses of someone that does not constitute a medical certificate could help students greatly. As someone with a compromised immune system, it is not feasible for me to produce a medical certificate for my symptoms every other week or day. Due to the hassle of obtaining a medical certificate, I have often had to sacrifice my health to attend classes, sometimes only a single class, that could have easily been done online. Consequently, I end up getting more sick and struggle with worse symptoms that I could not ignore," adds Rashad.

A chronic illness alters a person's way of living to a significant extent. However, if we stand together as a community, advocate for an equal playing field for our peers, and empathise with and support those who struggle with their health to the best of our extent, the world can be a kinder, safer, warmer place for us to live in.

"Throughout the years, I have come to realise that a chronic illness is not the end of your life, no matter how much society makes you feel otherwise. It is very important to stand up for yourself. Even if you're the only person who needs accommodations in your entire institute," says Yunus.

*A. M. Fahad is a university admission candidate.*



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