

Swimming Pools

The first fall that I remember happened when I was three years old. We were at my mother's job when those four carpeted steps attacked her, placing her on a month-long leave as she battled to recover. I never saw her fall, but I heard her and ran over, asking what I could do to help as she assured me that she was fine. Her traitorous tears told a different story, and one that would be repeated throughout my childhood. My mother was, and is, rarely fine. Because even when she claims she is, she is lying to me the same way I lie to her--it is a push-and-pull of mistruths that we both need to believe. Over the years, these lies have grown in size, and as her ailments multiply, so do our half-truths. There have been so many--too many--falls and surgeries and injections that I can recall, but this was the first that I can remember. Okay, maybe I'm lying. Maybe I don't remember the fall itself--maybe I simply remember the retelling of the story, but in my mind I can see her fall. I don't mean to lie--it just happens sometimes.

The first fall was the first raindrop, and it seems to be that we live in a rainforest. In more recent times, and years after the first fall, my mother fell again while taking the trash out--a simple task that her body would not allow her to complete. A single step made her lose her balance; a single step earned her a surgery and months of outpatient rehab. A single step derailed her year.

She took another fall in our parking lot, allowing for the roots of another surgery to take hold. It was winter time, and black ice got the better of her. Frozen rain.

And two years ago she fell again--down the stairs, destroying her knee. She was told that she would need surgery, and she got it, but it didn't help. Nothing ever really does.

As time went on, the pain gradually got worse, almost imperceptibly so. Day by day the raindrops of her pain sprinkled--until one day the puddles became pools. It's a community pool, with no lifeguard in sight. No one quite knows the rules of this pool--we just know that she has fibromyalgia, a condition that leaves her in constant, chronic pain. The rules are too loosely defined--we don't know if there's a cure, we don't know what will help, and we don't know how bad it will get. And maybe that's why I'm such a good liar. Because if I tell her the truth, if I stop reassuring her that everything will get better, I will be adding buckets upon buckets of water to that pool. And we don't know what will happen if it overflows.

There are a million ways, and yet no ways, that you can help someone dealing with conditions so personal. I will never truly grasp what she is going through, never take a physical step in her shoes, and so the ability to really, truly empathize is lacking. I can offer words of wisdom that I do not possess, give advice that I would never follow, and lie through my teeth that things will get better, but it's a futile task to make her feel better. Nearly impossible--but these small impossibilities, hopes that maybe things will improve, can offer temporary relief. And sometimes that is enough. I want to share my enoughts with you. Here are the best ways I've learned to help those who can never be healed.

Do Your Research- And Monitor Theirs

When your loved one is stressed, upset, or scared, it can be helpful to know the facts so that you can negate the thoughts rushing through their heads. It is inevitable that one day your loved one will come across an article titled "How Arthritis Shaves Years Off Of Your Life" or

“Why Sleep Apnea is More Dangerous Than Cancer.” These articles may be truthful, but many are designed to draw in vulnerable audiences with a morbid curiosity to know what death sentence their disorder entails. Knowing that Type 2 diabetes is preventable is better than reading the *Buzzfeed* articles that say that it’s primarily genetic and out of your control. Because at some point, no matter how poor the grammar or awful the composition of these articles, their message will get across. So, be ready to contradict all the terrifying facts they’ve learned--look up why their condition is not life-altering, how manageable it can be, and how a community can be formed by those with their condition. Be ready to fact-check them off the edge--and debating with facts always makes for more compelling arguments. Surround yourself with articles that don’t make their condition seem “that bad.” Know your facts so that opinions can never sway you. Stay confident in the truths that cannot be argued--the ones that will help your loved ones sleep at night.

Listen

For most people, if they’ve had a really bad day, been through a rough breakup, or have been fired from their dream job, they like to talk about it. Now imagine that every day your bones feel like they’ve been through a breakup, your muscles have been fired from Google, and your knees just lost their phone on the subway. Rough, isn’t it? Each morning my mother wakes up with missing keys and goes to bed missing her phone, too. I don’t know what it’s like to be fired from my job every day. I don’t know what it feels like to have my muscles on fire, my nerve endings fried, or what it feels like to cringe in pain with every step. But I do know how to sit, and listen, really listen, to what she is going through. It takes me half an hour to sit down and try to empathize, to understand, even if I never will. Having an outlet is critical to let some of that pain out, and giving your loved one your undivided attention for just a short period of time can make a world of difference.

Agree

Yes, that doctor who's been practicing for fifteen years has no idea what he's talking about. The professor who conducted that research? Crazy. Didn't even go to an Ivy. There will be moments where you're agreeing to the most ridiculous statements. Moments where you scratch your head and go, "Yeah. There's no way the doctor is wrong." Trust me. The educated medical professional is in fact incorrect. And the one suffering? They know best. Trust them.

Lie

Despite what your parents, kindergarten teacher, and the police officer told you, lying is sometimes a superior policy to honesty. If your loved one is crying out in agony, telling them that five years from now they won't be able to walk probably isn't the best move. Because for so many people, it will only get worse. Maybe it will sprinkle day by day, and maybe on a random Tuesday in February there will be a monsoon, but forecasting the rain is never a good idea. We are not weathermen.

When it comes to caring for, loving, and supporting those with illnesses or pain, chronic or not, there is no one right way to help them. Maybe there are a million ways and maybe there are zero. Their swimming pools are filling inch by inch, day by day, and the best thing we can do is be an umbrella. Protect them, even if only temporarily, from the precipitation. Learn about this new facet of them, be a loving ear for them to talk off, agree with every ridiculous statement and lie through your teeth when it gets really bad. Tell them that it will get better, because even if they know better, they will listen. We don't always see the big picture when

we're focusing on such minute details, and showing them a sunny day can brighten their outlook on the darkest situations. So be a filthy liar. Be their umbrella. They will thank you for it.