

What can people skills do for you?

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Brief journeys into my local town are treasured. Some days it is an achievement to have managed to get there, to have been able to go into one shop to buy two items and then get myself home again. On these days I think less of other people and more of, 'How much energy do I have left?' and, 'Which aisle has the shortest queue?' On other days, I can afford to be less frantic and I do take note of those around me and when I can, I interact with fellow shoppers. It's what makes my day rewarding, pleasurable even.

Perhaps because it doesn't happen that often, I try to make trips out of the confines of my home have more meaning: I have to cherish my encounters with the outside world as they are so limited by my health.

I meet other shoppers' eyes and smile, or I might comment on a particularly sweet brand of oranges when I see a person's hand hover uncertainly over more than one variety. Or I may point someone to a fresher selection of vegetables, or recommend a particular brand of olives or ask if someone knows where the eggs are kept. If someone asks me a question, I readily answer. If someone tries to put humour into the conversation, I'm always ready with a laugh.

I often have to sit on a bench or seat, waiting for my husband who's in a queue. If I'm sharing the bench with someone else, I try to work out whether the person wants to be left undisturbed or whether he or she would appreciate the diversion of conversation while waiting. Very often, people do enjoy talking and welcome the activity.

Recently, I sat in a café while my husband walked on to a shop to return something. A young woman sat opposite me and by the time my husband returned we were in full flow. He joined us and I introduced him and we became a threesome. After, when we were clear of the café, my husband asked who had made the first move to talk? It had been a mutual thing – she had asked permission to sit down, I had said very warmly that she was welcome to join me. I had to blow my nose and she'd said she had a cold too. I explained I hadn't a cold, my nose was running from the hot chips I was eating. And we went on from there.

Ten years or more ago, I wouldn't have dreamt of talking to strangers. I was far too shy. I was also brought up not to speak to people I didn't know. But I am enjoying breaking that rule and chatting to people has become a habit.

You too can enhance your personal experiences by tapping into the great resource of other people and what they can, unwittingly give you – and the reciprocal pleasure you can wittingly give them. A few hurried words now and then do much to lighten our day and so lighten our load. The burden of chronic ill health, that goes beyond many other people's patience and understanding, can be made easier by having other people on our side. Having poor people skills deprives of us much needed social support. It is too easy for us to be lonely, and too easy for us to only focus on ourselves in our person-to-person interactions. It is when we show readiness to listen to another person's woes that sometimes they become willing listeners of our own. It is when we stretch a hand of friendship out to other people, they realise they can offer friendship in return. And when we know how to handle ourselves, and our conversations, we make people want more of us because we become rewarding people to spend time with and valuable people to have on their side.

By learning people skills and practising them regularly, we become appreciated by other people and we recognise our own self-worth. Since low self-esteem is part of life when we are not feeling well, probably are unemployed and unemployable from the severity of our illness, we should take the chance to do something to redress the balance.

When people are out, hurrying after their own concerns, they might forget that the people they jostle in haste are just like them in that they have their hopes and dreams and disappointments. Many have little time to think they are so busy doing. People with ME on the other hand, often have a surplus of time to think – when their brain allows them to – and little energy to do. So fine-tune your people skills to gain the most from every social interaction available to you and see what a difference it can make in your life. I have and it's something now I will never change.

I don't know about you, but I have been sorely tried in my illness by insensitive comments from people. Someone hasn't told them that life is hard when you are challenged and you don't need it made harder still by other people's ignorant and ill-founded comments. Assertion will help protect you from these people and to deliver your piece in a way that cannot be dismissed. In being assertive, you claw back your self-worth and demand from others the respect you deserve. So the next time someone implies you're lazy, why not rejoinder with, 'Why did you just say that?' or, 'What point are you trying to make?'

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