

A Rolling Perspective: Empower(chair) Yourself | CPD Blog

Jennifer Holland

07/20/2018

Why on earth would you get yourself a power chair if your health team doesn't recommend it? My personal story of "empowerchair-ment" might provide you with a new perspective. My wish is for you, too, to lead a vibrant life of joy and empowerment because of your chair, not in spite of it.

Wheelchairs have an image problem. Sadly, even those who could most benefit from them view wheelchairs as an end, not a beginning. Doctors encourage us to "walk at all costs," using the fear of wheelchair confinement as incentive. As I buzz around Salt Lake County in my chair, spreading the Gospel of Empowerment to those I believe could use wheels, I meet heavy resistance. People fear others' reactions; that they'll be seen as lazy, attention-seeking, or an outright failure. Wheelchairs epitomize weakness.

I know; I've been there. Fighting the tide of fear surrounding disability with which our society is awash wears me out sometimes. The old, the infirm, the poor: we visually clash with the images of savvy youth and sassy seniors our society idolizes by reminding people of their own mortality and vulnerability. So, to keep doctors happy and themselves "free" from negative societal opinions, Americans keep trying to walk despite the pain. I, too, used to gird my loins and grit my teeth, willing myself to reach a bus stop two blocks away only because my doctor said I had to keep walking no matter what. More often than not, I didn't get on the bus. Instead, I rested on the Rollator until I could face the arduous journey home. My life became ever more circumscribed, restricted to the radius I could painfully navigate through sheer willpower. Ashamed and sad, I eventually just hid in my home.

Then, in 2011, I read Byron Katie's book, *Loving What Is*. I learned I caused my own suffering by believing unquestioned thoughts, in this case: Walking is always better than using a wheelchair. Here is Katie's method, called *The Work*. Implementing it has stopped my suffering and has empowered me to fully embrace whatever Life throws at me.

First, I asked myself if it was really true, that walking was better than being in a wheelchair. It certainly felt true, and I knew my doctors sure thought it was true. Katie recommends asking the question twice: Is it true? And, Are you absolutely certain it's true?

The third question is, How do I feel when I believe the thought, "Walking is always better than using a wheelchair"? Because I couldn't walk well, I felt sad. Angry. Depressed. Frustrated. A failure. Add the whines, "I'm too young for this," and "My life is over." Yikes! No wonder I suffered.

Then the game-changing fourth question: What if it was impossible to have the thought, 'walking is always better than using a wheelchair'? How would I feel then? Whoa. (To answer this question, Mind must create new answers, as its job is to provide evidence to support our thoughts, no matter how untrue.) Well, I'd feel happy to have a better way to get around. I'd feel strong and proud instead of weak and ashamed. I'd feel empowered.

The final step, the turnaround, is to take the original thought and "turn it around" until the new thought feels at least as true as the old one, such as, Walking is not better than using a wheelchair. My "A-ha moment" came with, Using a wheelchair is better than walking. Then I just added because and the reasons tumbled out: I could easily get to the bus stop...I'd have energy to do what I'd intended....it's way more comfortable....it's safer..., and so on. I laughed and came up with several more. I had freed myself from wheelchair fear!

You, too, can overcome any scary thoughts with this method. Any thoughts that trigger sadness, shame, anger, powerlessness, or fear provide your starting place for The Work. This isn't "mind over matter," or "putting on a brave face," or even a "positive attitude." Those all take white-knuckle work. My joy at having a new-to-me wheelchair is effortless and real. It takes courage to question thoughts, yes; if I have anything, I have that. But so do you. If I do feel sad these days, it's watching needless suffering—my own or others'—from unexamined thoughts.

Adaptive sports and opportunities abound in Utah for low- or no-cost because we're using assistive devices. In future blogs, I will share myriad ways you, too, can create a vibrant new life, whatever your medical or financial situation. And together, we can show our medical teams, friends, and families that such assistive devices as power wheelchairs do not signal the end, but instead hold the promise of an empowered and joyful life.