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I Got My Back

Janice Rhoshalle Littlejohn learned how to balance work and life with lupus

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These days I'm relentless about taking care of myself. I eat five small meals a day loaded with fruits and dark green vegetables, drink lots of water and take vitamin supplements. Four times a week, I do about two hours of cardiovascular and weight training. After working a regular eight-hour day as a freelance writer, I take time to relax and get at least six hours of sleep. My friends say I look great, and I won't argue. I've gotten my life back.

Four years ago things weren't so rosy. I'd contracted shingles, a virus causing an itchy rash and stabbing pains. It was the first debilitating manifestation I'd had of lupus since I was diagnosed with the antibodies 12 years earlier.

Lupus is a disease in which the immune system attacks itself. It affects approximately 1.5 million Americans—90% of them women, often women of color. Common symptoms include swollen and achy joints, fevers, fatigue and rashes, but no two cases are alike. Not much is known about what causes lupus, although hormones, the environment and genetics may be factors. I'd also been warned that sun overexposure, trauma, certain drugs and herbal remedies (including Echinacea) and stress could trigger symptoms.

When the illness finally hit me, I didn't want to admit to myself or anyone else that I was sick. I liked being Superwoman and even tried to continue that pace, working on my laptop in bed as codeine-laced Ibuprofen sent my world spinning.

But finally, I had to tell. It was silly to have waited, considering the overwhelming support I received. Family, friends and my editors rallied around me, giving me confidence to discuss my plight with other lupus patients who taught me to recognize stress and obey my body.

Now, eight months into remission, there's no pain, medication to take or need for constant bed rest. I'm not certain my healthy regime turned the tide. But considering my doctor's heed to "straighten up and fly right" or run the risk of far greater illness, I'd like to believe my new vigilance helped and continues to keep the disease at bay.

It took me a while to learn the importance of balance and begin a new chapter in my life. My "happily ever after" now depends on it.

For information about lupus as well as support groups, contact the Lupus Foundation of America (866-484-3532; www.lupus.org) or the Lupus Research Institute (212-685-4118; www.LupusResearchInstitute.org).
