

Reconnecting with an Old Friend When Living with a Chronic Disease

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admin

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About six months ago, I reconnected with my childhood best friend, Suzanne, after losing contact with her more than 15 years ago. We had been very close since meeting in third grade in Alabama. She even spent most of the summer with me when my family moved to Florida four years later.

Both of us moved around during the years that followed, but we stayed in touch with phone calls and letters. Though we were miles apart, we grew up together, sharing the best and worst of our lives.

Then, sometime around 2003, we lost touch. I remember the last time we talked. She had called in the middle of the night. Normally, I wouldn't have answered the phone, but I saw her name on caller ID and picked up. When we said goodbye, little did we know that we wouldn't speak to each other again for more than a decade.

I don't know how we lost contact with each other. She was newly remarried, and I was recently divorced, and maybe our lives just got in the way. I tried calling her number a few times but didn't get an answer. Emails bounced back. I even found her parents' address online and tried sending them a letter in the hope of finding her. Every time I bought a new

cellphone, I transferred her number over so that I would see her name on caller ID if she ever called. I finally gave up and deleted her number a few years ago, fearing that something had happened to her.

I didn't want toxic people from my past to know about my current life, so I didn't join Facebook until I married in 2016. I used my married name and set high privacy settings. As I began connecting with friends, Suzanne was one of the first people I searched for.

I tried every iteration of her name: married name, maiden name, first name (Suzanne is her middle name), and even her original surname before she adopted her stepfather's name. But I didn't recognize any of the profiles that came up in my search.

Then, one Sunday afternoon in June, I received a Facebook Messenger notification. It was from Suzanne! My eyes welled up with tears, and my fingers couldn't type fast enough as we said how much we missed each other and how we had tried to find each other over the years. She had eventually discovered my eldest sister on Facebook, and she told her that my profile was under my married name.

When I told Suzanne about being diagnosed with Crohn's and having a liver transplant, she asked if my health issues were related to the lumps on my neck I'd had when I was younger. I had forgotten that shortly after I moved to Florida, the lymph nodes in my neck would occasionally become swollen. My parents took me to a doctor who attributed it to cat-scratch disease because I had no other symptoms.

I was surprised that Suzanne remembered the lumps on my neck from over 30 years ago, and I realized how important it is to maintain friendships when chronically ill. While I have a supportive family, friends know and understand you differently. At times I've avoided sharing how my chronic disease affects me physically and emotionally with my family because I didn't want them to worry or give me advice. Having a friend who listens to you complain, laughs at your stupid jokes, and cries with you is different. And a friend who will take your secrets to the grave is particularly hard to come by.

When I was hospitalized and diagnosed with Crohn's disease in 2006, a few friends visited me in the hospital. However, I wished that I could have talked to Suzanne because she's like family. When my liver failed two years ago, and a potential donor had been found, I said goodbye to my family the night before my scheduled transplant. My heart ached that I hadn't found Suzanne, and I sent out a silent goodbye to her like a prayer.

Having a chronic disease — or several, in my case — I know that life is short and relationships are precious. Now that Suzanne and I have reconnected, we've promised not to lose each other again. We're already planning on meeting up when my husband, Patrick,

and I go on our annual trip to Florida's Emerald Coast next summer. Even though we haven't seen each other since 1998, I'm sure that we'll pick up where we left off, just as we have so many times before.

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