

Redefining enough

Millie Bridger reflects on the shifting landscape caused by chronic illness.

Speed read...

Millie lived life at full throttle. She measured her worth by what she achieved. When chronic illness hit, she grieved who she used to be. She had to listen to her body, piecing together a new identity. Now 'enough' no longer looks like a full day and a complete to-do list. She adjusted to a slower world, and within it seeks to support others with chronic illness.

Chronic illness doesn't always announce itself. Sometimes it just takes things apart slowly, until you realise you're living a different life than the one you planned.

That's where my story begins. Before illness, I lived at full speed. I trained in dance, worked hard, and filled my days to the edges. I measured my worth by what I could achieve. Productivity was my native language. Rest was something I earned, never something I deserved.

Then illness arrived, without permission and without certainty. In my case, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome was the root, and over time it brought a cascade of secondary conditions: chronic fatigue, debilitating pain, dysautonomia, gastrointestinal failure and immune dysfunction.

Alongside these came symptoms that mirrored ME: post-exertional malaise, unrefreshing sleep, orthostatic intolerance, sensory

overload and severe cognitive dysfunction that made even the most basic of tasks impossible to navigate.

The fatigue wasn't tiredness. It was floor-swallowing exhaustion that no amount of sleep fixed. My body stopped behaving predictably. The world continued at its usual pace while mine slowed, then stalled, and finally demanded entirely new rules.

At first, I treated being ill as a personal failure. I thought that if I pushed harder, ignored symptoms, or simply 'powered through', I could outwork my own biology. That mindset is common among people with chronic illness, particularly those raised to chase achievement. We keep trying to be who we used to be, convinced that enough discipline will bring that version back.

It took me years to learn that illness of this nature is not a problem you solve with force. It is a shifting landscape you navigate, one fragile day at a time.



Losing the old definition of 'enough'

The hardest part was losing my old definition of enough. Enough used to mean a full day, a completed to-do list, a sense of forward motion. When my health took away the ability to work consistently, travel freely, eat normally or manage basic self-care without consequences, I felt empty. I grieved the version of myself who could keep up.

People often assume grief only belongs to funerals or heartbreak, but chronic illness introduces a quieter grief. It is the grief of

watching peers move forward while you stay behind. The grief of losing hobbies, independence, spontaneity. Doctors don't usually mention this part. It doesn't show up on medical charts, but it sits heavily in the body.

There's a version of my life most people never see: the hospital stays, the tubes, the alarms, the sepsis scares, the body that can't fight infections. When I talk about fatigue, pain, or sensory overload, I don't mean inconvenience. I mean the kind of limitations that rearrange your entire existence. Productivity, the thing I once leaned on for validation, was no longer available to me. I did not know how to exist without it.

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Relearning life at a different pace

Redefining enough began not with acceptance, but with surrender. Not the defeatist kind, but the kind where you stop fighting your body long enough to listen to it.

I started noticing tiny victories: tolerating feeds without severe flares, sitting up for longer than expected, attending an appointment without collapsing afterwards, managing a conversation without



cognitive fog shutting me down. Ordinary tasks became monumental.

Post-exertional malaise taught me that pacing wasn't optional. Pushing through triggered crashes that lasted days. Sensory overload turned bright lights and noise into landmines. Unrefreshing sleep meant I woke up tired no matter how long I'd been in bed. I learned to treat rest not as laziness, but as medicine.

Alongside pacing, I began piecing together a new identity. Illness stripped away the louder parts of me, so I was forced to get curious about what was left. What do I value when productivity is gone? Who am I when nobody sees the effort behind the scenes? What brings me joy on the smallest scale?

Illness slows life down in ways you never asked for, and in the quiet you notice things you used to run past. There was beauty there all along, I just didn't have time to see it before.

There was another shift too, one that came from surviving things I never expected to survive. I've had sepsis three times, spent time in intensive care, and navigated infections with a body that no longer has a working immune system. There

have been moments where the outcome could easily have been different. I don't feel grateful for the suffering itself. It's hard to be grateful for days spent in bed, in pain, or fighting symptoms most people will never see. But I am grateful to still be here.

Perspective becomes its own language after experiences like that. Everything looks different. Ordinary things feel louder. Life feels fragile and precious in the same breath.

If I'm still here, then I want my time to matter. I want to turn what I've lived through into something that helps someone else feel less alone. I want the suffering to mean something, not in a heroic way, but in a human one.

Finding meaning in connection

As I adjusted to this slower world, I realised how isolating it could be. Chronic illness can turn even the strongest people into silent spectators of their own lives. Friends and family often care, but they don't always understand. Support groups became a lifeline. Listening to other people with similar symptoms made my own feel less strange. It's easier to survive this life when you don't have to explain yourself first.

Eventually, I wanted to create that environment for others. I started writing about illness, identity and the emotional terrain of adapting to a body that no longer behaves. Writing became my way of telling the truth without sugarcoating it. People began reaching out with their own stories, and suddenly isolation wasn't absolute anymore.

From there, my work grew naturally. I now run a community for people living with chronic illness where we talk about the real parts of this life: the grief, the humour, the loneliness, the tiny wins. We meet online, we share resources and we learn how to pace, rest, and advocate for ourselves. It's called Finding Happiness, Together, because sometimes happiness doesn't mean being cured. Sometimes it means being understood.

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Redefining what enough means now

These days, 'enough' looks different. It might be managing a tube feed without complications. It might be answering one message. It might be showing up to a group call. Some days, enough is simply existing without self-blame.

My 'why' is simple: if I have to live this life, I want it to matter. I want our stories in rooms where decisions are made. I want people with chronic illness to feel visible rather than forgotten, valued rather than dismissed.

If you're reading this while navigating your own version of chronic illness, I hope you know that your life hasn't shrunk just because the pace changed. There is possibility in the quiet. There is connection in community. There is identity beyond productivity.

Surviving the worst parts of illness didn't make me grateful for suffering, but it did give me clarity. Life feels fragile now, and strangely beautiful, and I'm trying to make my time matter.

Millie Bridger is an advocate, speaker, writer and creator. She leads Finding Happiness, Together, an online community that offers support groups, resources and real conversation for people with long-term health conditions. You can find her work and community spaces at milliebridger.com