

Sleep Apnea Awareness Day – **My Journey**

by Naomi Mac

When I was diagnosed with sleep apnea in January 2018 the most prominent emotion I felt was relief. After numerous tests with no outcome I was starting to believe I was going crazy and even manifesting the random and numerous symptoms. I jumped onto getting a CPAP machine straight away and I came out all guns blazing. 2018 was going to be my year of being back to the “normal me”! As soon as I had some energy back I was determined to prove to myself and to everyone else that I was back! But the random symptoms, sleepiness, poor concentration and forgetfulness didn't just evaporate overnight...or even after a few weeks. All that ended up happening was that I put more pressure on myself. For every couple of steps forward I took a step or two back.

For someone who is naturally a doer, and self-described over-organiser, likes to be active, social and for whom the FOMO (fear of missing out) struggle is real, the gradual realisation that what I really needed was a big healthy dose of self-care was one very hard pill to swallow. Some serious self-reflection and analysis was required. If you don't look after yourself then you aren't really good to anyone else. This was something I really had to accept and embrace.

Whilst the CPAP machine was providing physical treatment – it kept my airways open so that I didn't stop breathing while I slept, I started to realise some of my biggest challenges with sleep apnea was around my behaviour and habits and patterns I'd fallen into. As they say old habits die hard! I also knew that I needed to add in some new ones with regards to my treatment and lifestyle.

It's easy to retreat and fall into patterns when you have “not been yourself” for quite some time. Gradually I hadn't recognised or acknowledged that with having untreated sleep apnea I had inadvertently become less independent, lost confidence, my moods were affected and I had periods creep in of being unmotivated and general malaise.

It was time to break the cycle and start some new ones!

So I decided to let the journey be organic and not put pressure on myself. It took a while to become accustomed to the CPAP machine (even though others had much quicker success) but I decided to just relax and just let it do its thing. I had many nights of claustrophobia at first and sub consciously pulling the mast off at night. Maintenance and setting it up every night was an unwanted additional task. Then there was the prospect of travelling with the CPAP machine, implementing good sleep hygiene and regular sleeping patterns, a fair amount of stigma and the big one - accepting the fact that I have a medical condition that needs daily management for the rest of my life.

It's easy to focus on the negative – misery loves company right? I certainly had the why me, poor me attitude for some time. But gradually the CPAP treatment along with better sleep hygiene and a holistic approach to my treatment, my life started to turn around. My husband and support network have all been crucial and amazing. I also learnt as part of my journey to be more open about sleep apnea and the issues I was facing and accept the support from those around me - family, friends, colleagues, community - and also use it as an opportunity to raise awareness. It's surprisingly more common than I realised.

I see the behavioural shift as a constant learning curve. I'm taking the small achievements and wins as I go along (like having the brain power, focus and courage to write this story). It's certainly not all smooth sailing – queue my regular forgetfulness - and as my journey continues it may be a year later than planned but I'm bidding farewell to brain fog and I feel I really am back in 2019!

