

# CHRONIC ILLNESS GRRL



ISSUE 1  
ORIGIN STORY

Hi! What you hold in your hands is (not surprisingly) my first attempt at a comic. This is more or less autobiographical (including superpowers!), but of course timelines and some other things have been changed for narrative sake. Clearly I am not an artist, but I hope that you enjoy and/or relate to this story. I am fat (this isn't a derogatory comment, merely a neutral statement, I am also blond and short, etc.) and that has affected how doctors have treated me. As someone who refuses to make weight loss a goal (though weight loss - or gain - is fine if it happens) and also knows that diets have a failure rate of around 95%, it can be tough dealing with all these doctors! So I have also included in the back an article I wrote about navigating doctors while fat. I love making new friends and hearing from old ones so feel free to email me at: [Katie.tastrom@gmail.com](mailto:Katie.tastrom@gmail.com) or mail stuff to me (I ADORE trades and love sending care packages!) at 434 Horan Rd., Syracuse, NY, 13209.

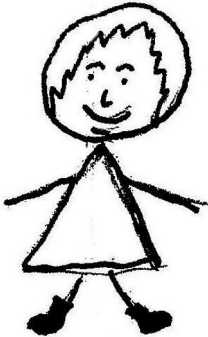
Xoxo  
Katie

p.s.- this took forever to do since part of my illnesses means that my hands give out pretty quickly after writing or drawing. That's also why this page is typed! <3

p.p.s.- It is spelled grrl as an homage to the Riot Grrl movement. My thanks to all those that created and contributed to Riot Grrl, which though flawed was very influential for me. Without it I wouldn't have had the (newfound) confidence to put something so imperfect into the world and also may not have survived to make it this far.

# Origin Story

At first I was just a typical 20 something...



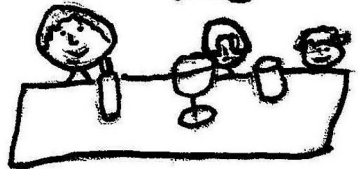
Living in Seattle...



Working...



BAR

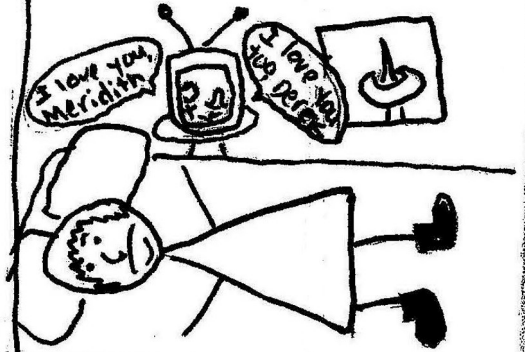


Hanging out with friends...

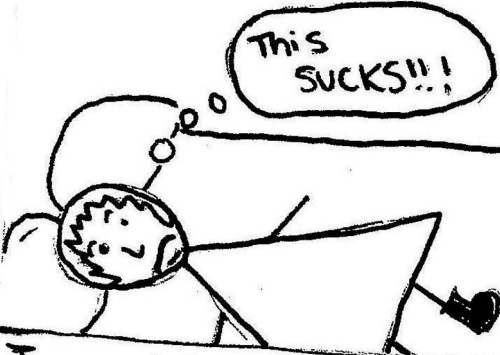
Then when I was home for Xmas I got the flu.



I couldn't shake it.



I had pain all over and was exhausted all the time



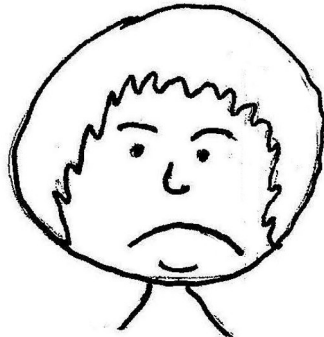
I tried to keep working but kept having to leave early



I couldn't do anything anymore



I was miserable physically and mentally.



I decided to go to the doctor...



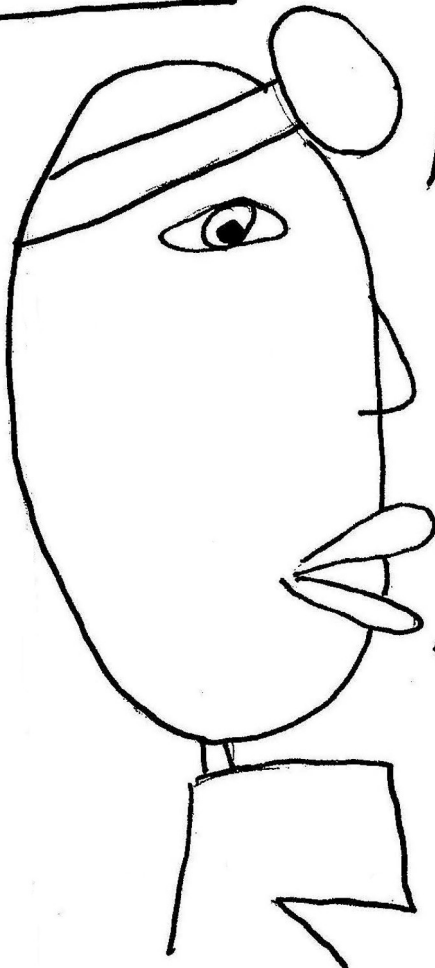
It's probably psychological.

You just need to lose weight

Take some tylenol

Just relax

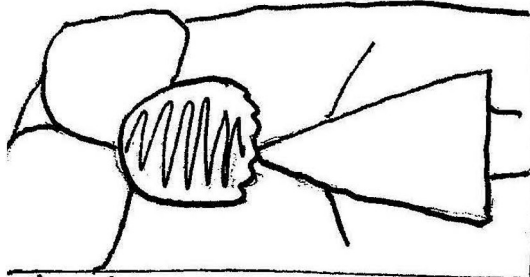
Exercise more



Overall it was kind of an awful experience

Not a single thing the doctor said was helpful

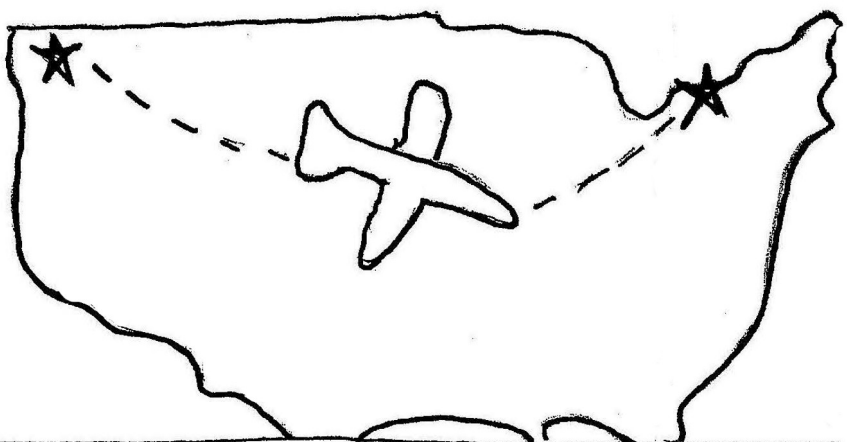
I had to quit my job



We'll miss you!



And move back home to upstate NY

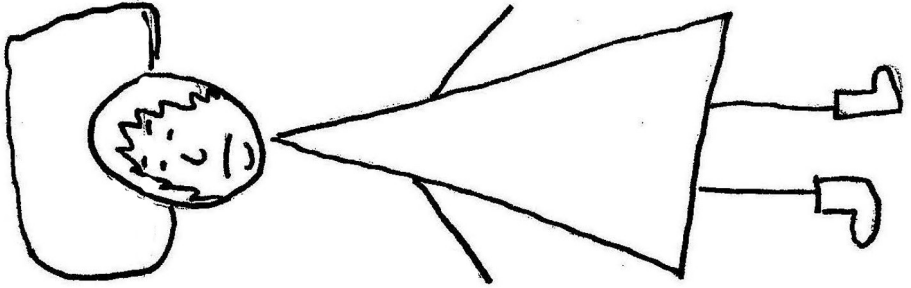


I was glad to be back home with my family

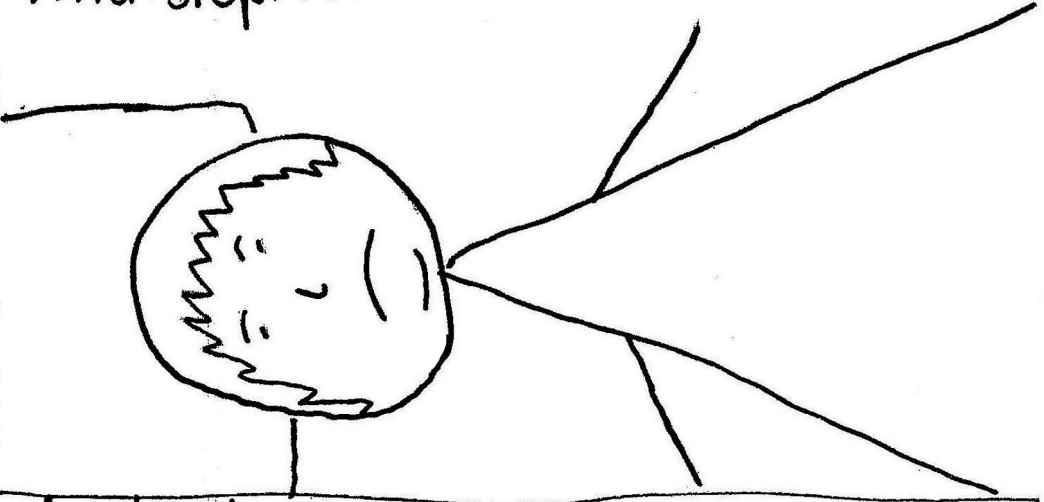


But I still felt like shit

Scared to try another doctor, but sicker than ever, I slept



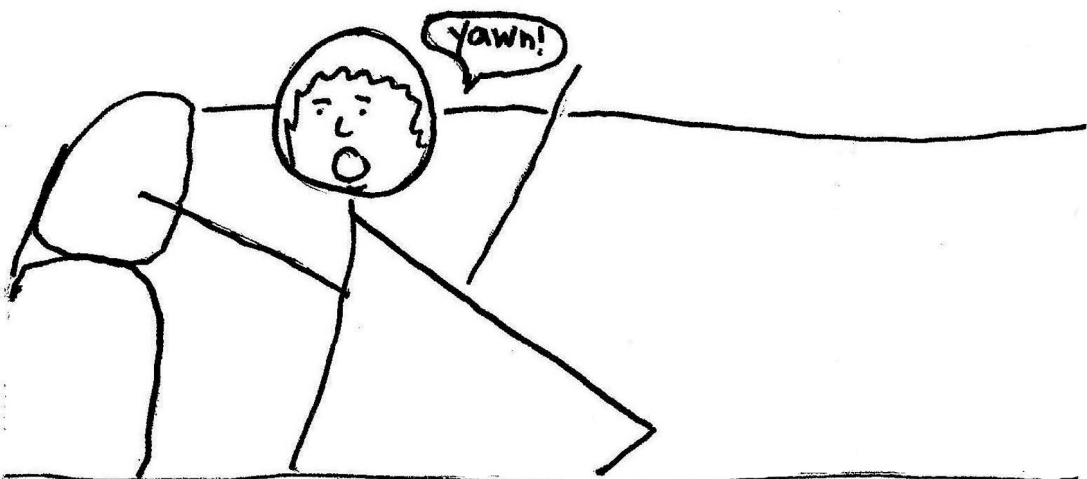
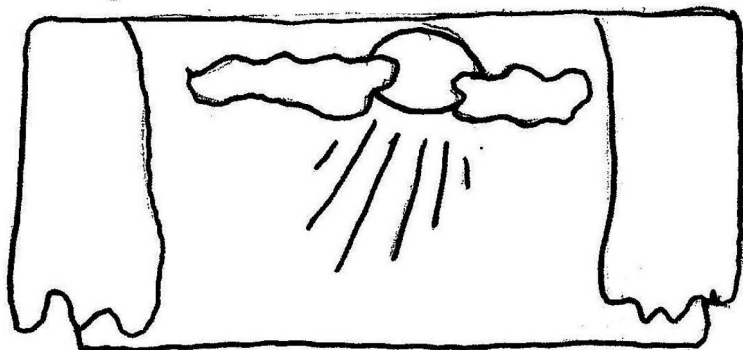
And slept...



And slept



I didn't know it at the time, but the more I slept, the stronger I got



I eventually was able to get out of bed and with the support of my family and friends...

Chronic Illness

Grrl was born!



I'm Chronic  
Illness Grrr!

Watch out,  
Crappy doctors!  
I will vanquish  
you!

(Or you can treat  
me with respect  
and consideration  
and take my concerns  
seriously. Your choice.)



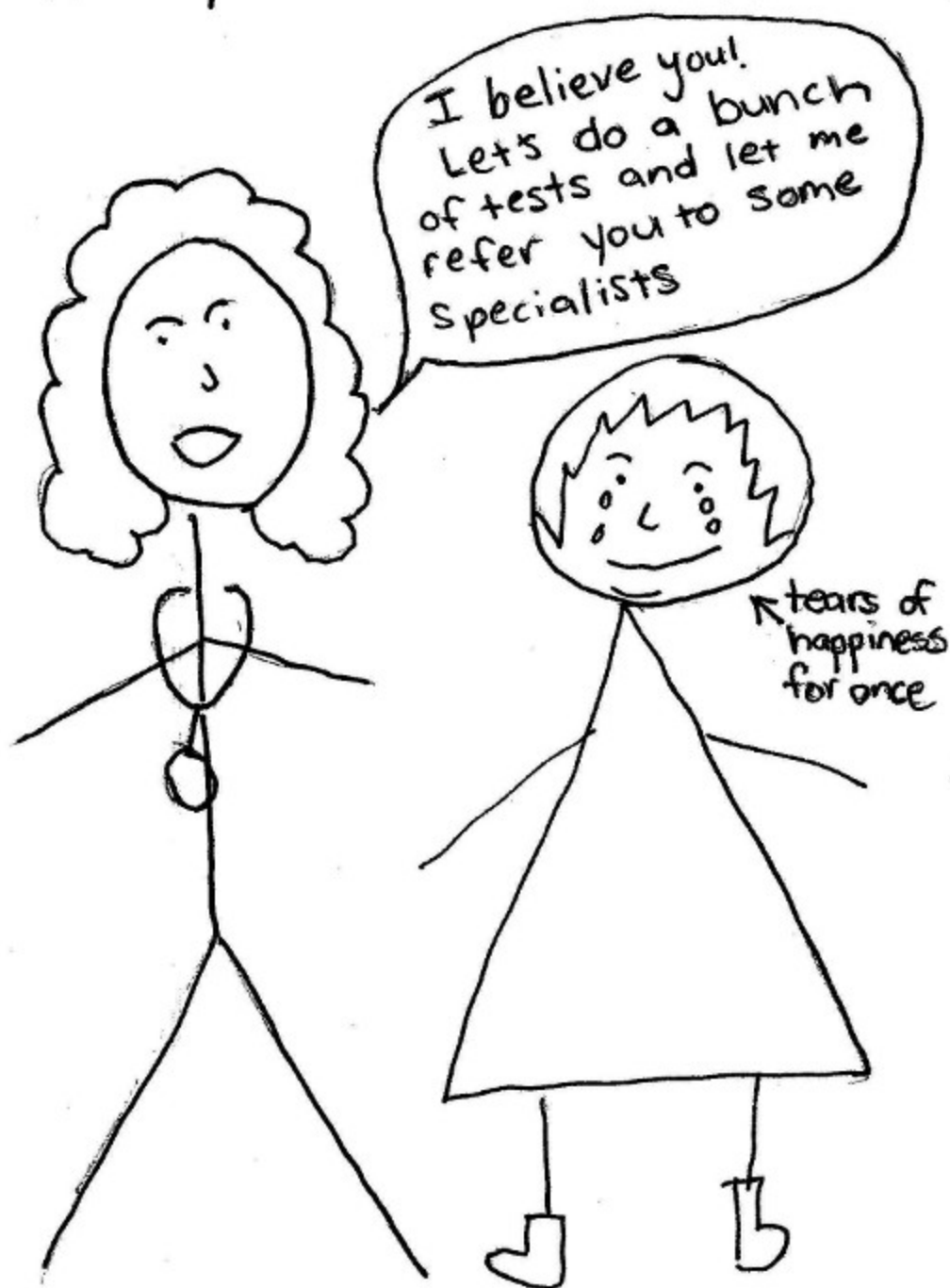
I still felt like shit

I still had to weed through a bunch of shitty doctors. I judged the success of my appointments by whether or not I could make it to my car before I burst into tears. I got a lot better at holding my ground though.\*

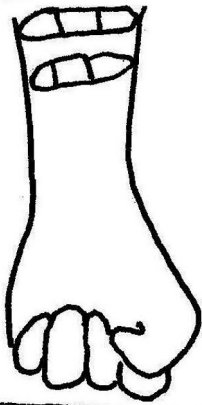


\*(See more about my experience and tips for dealing with doctors as a fat person at the end

I finally found a decent doctor!

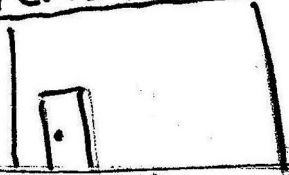


I got a bunch of blood taken

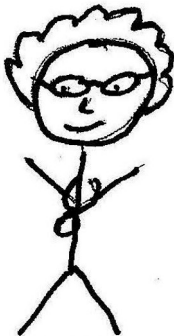


And saw a Rheumatologist  
(They specialize in joint  
and muscle inflammation)

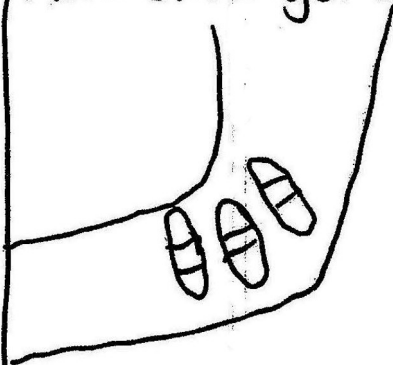
ARTHRITIS  
HEALTH DRs.



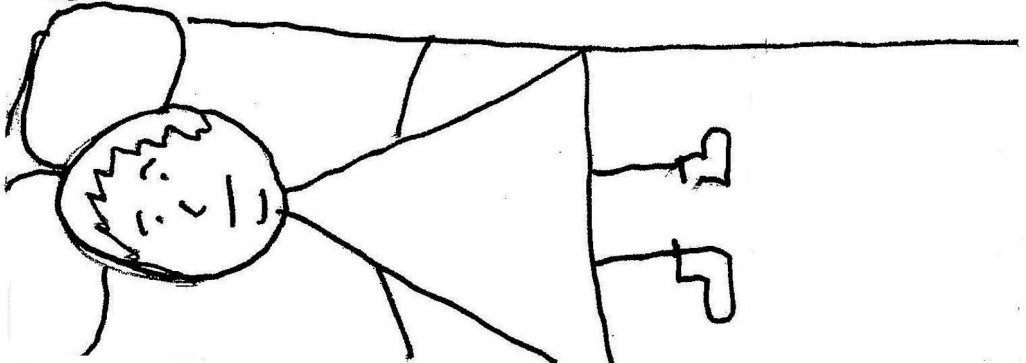
Dr. Jean was very nice



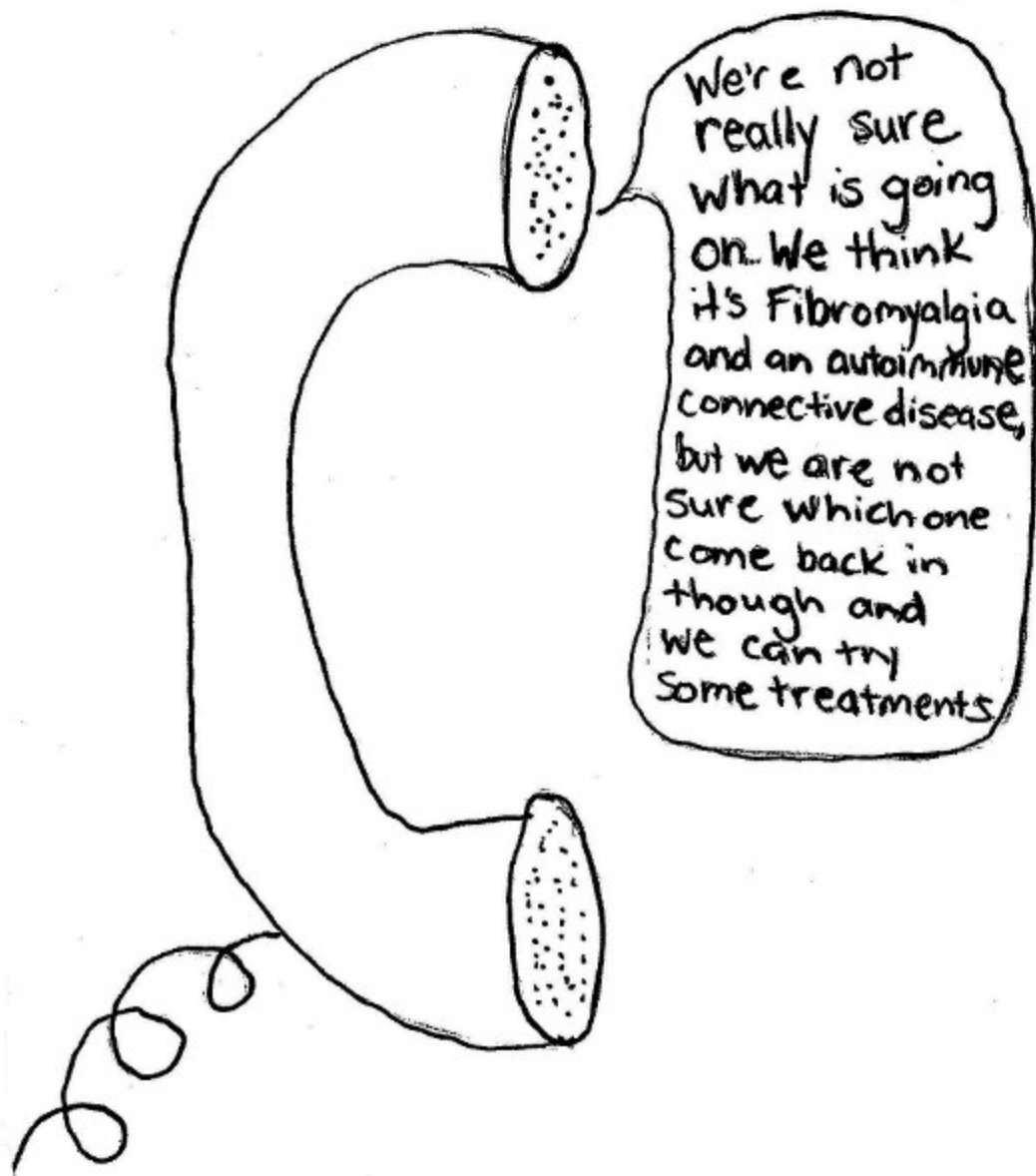
More blood got taken



I waited by the phone (in bed) for results



Finally...



We're not really sure what is going on. We think it's Fibromyalgia and an autoimmune connective disease, but we are not sure which one come back in though and we can try some treatments

Back at the Dr's



While of course the idea of tons of meds sucked, I was excited to try some things that would hopefully help. I was even more excited that I was being listened to and believed.

But they worked well enough that I could get out of bed!



I was happy...



PHARMACY

Some helped... some didn't, or the side effects were too bad

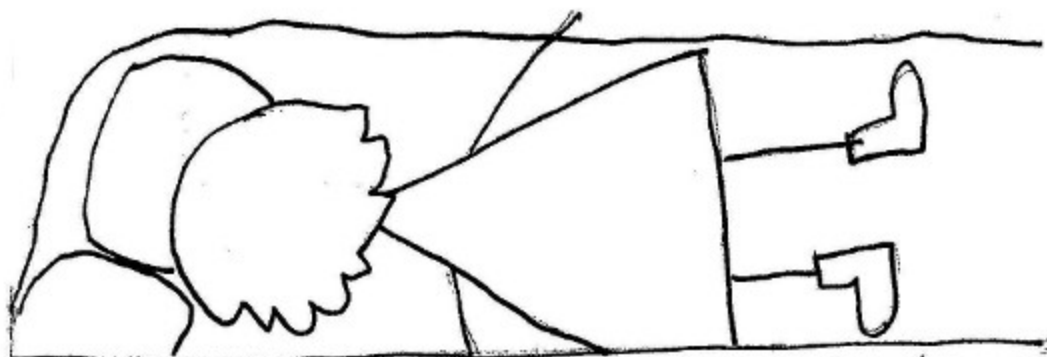


And then it hit me...



I was going to be sick for the rest of my life

It's hard realizing that your whole life  
is different now



I had planned to  
have a fancy career



Exec.  
Dir.  
But I didn't know if  
I could work at all.

I had a few local non-  
sick friends...

BAR



and a whole bunch  
of kids



or if raising kids was  
physically possible

but they didn't really  
understand what I was  
going through. I did  
a lot of Facebook  
chatting with other  
sick friends



I still felt isolated.



I cried a lot.

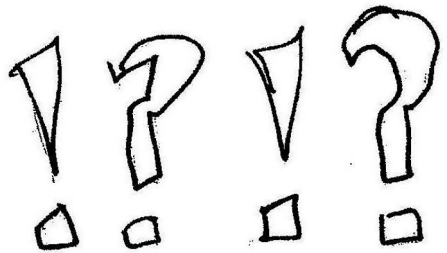


Everyone was supportive, but I needed community.

One night chatting with a sick friend about how isolated I felt, they had the idea to create a Facebook group for other queer sick and disabled people. We added people and it became a great place to give and receive support. I learned that while being sick meant a lot of losses, I also gained

some things too, like a new community.

But I still needed to come up with a plan for my life...



TO BE CONTINUED...



Thank you so much  
for reading this! I  
feel a little vulnerable  
putting something I  
made out into the  
world. I am glad  
you exist and that  
you read this.

XOXO  
Katie

p.s. - Thank you so much to my  
incredibly supportive family who  
help take care of me so  
wonderfully during flares  
and better times, both!

## **Fat hacks at the doctors**

Katie Tastrom Fenton

Going to the doctor sucks as a fat person. In fact, it can be downright deadly (See do no harm website <http://fathealth.wordpress.com/>, stories of fatphobia by doctors and other heal professions, obvious trigger warning for fatphobia.) In my own life, the doctor's office has been the primary site of fatshaming. Because of my disabilities I need to go to the doctor A LOT, and I have developed some "hacks" that have helped reduce some of the trauma. However, my experiences – and these tips – are absolutely influenced by other aspects of my identities besides my fatness (including the particular level of my fatness at the time, race, perceived class status, ability, gender, level of gender conformity, insurance, etc.) and the treatment we get from medical professionals will also be influenced by our identities and resources, if we even have access to doctors in the first place. With that in mind, here are some ideas that can hopefully help other fatties navigate health care.

- There is no "right" way to be fat at the doctors. Whatever choices you make, e.g. to be weighed or not, to educate or not when they say something fatphobic, etc. is completely up to you. I was fatshamed at the doctor yesterday and said little, and for a number of reasons I am going to continue to go to that doctor. Conversely, there is nothing wrong with walking out at the first sign of fat related shade. Like everything else this may also be influenced by identities and resources. For example, the above example notwithstanding, I am typically a lot more assertive with my doctors about body positivity now that I have insurance than I was the times I didn't have insurance. I guess my point is this: it's almost inevitably traumatic, do whatever you have to do to get what you need and remember that mental/emotional health is also an important part of health.

- Try to do as much research as you can beforehand when selecting health professionals. A great resource is the fat friendly health professionals list <http://cat-and-dragon.com/stef/Fat/ffp.html> . (However this list is much more helpful for folks living in urban areas and those with insurance.) I have found all of my favorite doctors through word of mouth. Also just general googling of reviews of doctors can be insightful, but of course you may not get information about fat friendliness. I have also found that after I found one halfway decent doctor, the specialists she has referred me to tended to be better than average about fat stuff and so now she is usually the first person I ask if I need to find another health professional.
- Bring support if you can. It can be amazingly helpful to have a rad fatty/rad ally with you. The power dynamics of the whole patient/doctor thing are so fucked up - and so many of us have trauma around this - which makes medical appointments so anxiety inducing that even those of us who are rarely at a loss for words can have a hard time advocating for ourselves. Having someone else there for emotional support, to step in and educate when you can't, or just to process afterwards can make a huge difference. If you can't bring someone with you, I have found in person or phone/text/email pep talks beforehand and debriefing sessions afterwards also really great. I would just caution to choose your debriefing partners carefully because the last thing you need is further fat shaming or concern trolling.
- Try to schedule in as much self-care as possible before and after the appointment. It's not always possible, but especially with new doctors I try to give myself at least a few hours after the appointment before I have to be anywhere so I can cry/nap/rage if it goes horribly.
- As a disabled person I definitely think there are some valid critiques of Health at Every Size (see <http://disabledfeminists.com/2010/10/11/further->

conversations-on-body-image-examining-health-at-every-size-haes/ ) However, HAES is the framework I use at the doctor's office. I have had pretty good success with doctors and other health professionals understanding the principles of HAES. I like to explain (this may or may not be an option for you) that I am happy to talk about my exercise and eating habits, but that I am not going to talk about weight loss or have that as a goal. For more information on HAES see Linda Bacon's work and <http://www.haescommunity.org/>.

- I also like to give doctors a heads up that dieting is not an option by writing it on intake forms and paperwork wherever it is the least bit relevant. For example, I write things like "I practice Health at Every Size" in the margin where they ask about "health problems" like "obesity". In general I like to start the conversation before I even meet anyone.
- Relatedly, I like to bring a card or piece of paper with me with some of my boundaries about fat stuff on it to be included in my records so everyone who looks at them can know where I am coming from. There is a great one at: <http://danceswithfat.wordpress.com/2013/04/01/what-to-say-at-the-doctors-office/> But like everything else on the list, it is up to you whether you think this would be helpful or not. Some doctors may get defensive and the appointment may become about you defending your right not to be fatshamed, instead of what you came in for. Personally, I tend to use cards like these when I am trying to establish a long term relationship with a doctor I will see often, but not for doctors I will see very infrequently or am just seeing one time. But like everything else you need to do what you think is best.
- Remember that you have a right not to be weighed. As a patient, you have the right to decline any medical test or treatment, which includes being weighed. There may be a time where weight may actually be relevant (for example anesthesia dosing), and you can cross that bridge when you come to it (and tell the doctor that if that is their argument for

why you should be weighed at the current appointment. If you are okay with being weighed, but don't want to know what your weight is, you can also let the nurse or doctor know that and you can face away from the scale. A great article about refusing to be weighed:

<http://wellroundedmama.blogspot.com/2010/03/you-have-right-to-decline-to-be-weighed.html>

I just want to reiterate that we all need to do whatever works for us and while educating health professionals about how to treat fat patients is great and can help other fatties have decent experiences at the doctor, none of us are under any obligation to do this. Please take care of yourself, whatever that means for you!

Xoxo Katie

NO, I DO  
NOT WANT TO  
HEAR ABOUT  
WHAT TREATMENT  
CURES, ETC. WORKED  
FOR YOUR FRIEND.

I am however, happy to  
hear from you about other  
stuff!

Katie.tastrom@  
gmail.com

