

VIGNETTE

I have just finished my 2nd year block placement (paediatric community) in Speech and Language Therapy at UEA and would like to share my story of completing a placement with a health condition.

When I was in my 2nd year at UEA, I began to suffer from chronic back pain. This was attributed to spinal and pelvic fractures sustained during a road traffic accident which had happened 5 years previously, despite having had a normal recovery. Even though I hid the severity of my condition from a lot of people, I really struggled with university life. Having previously loved the course and been a student who lived life to the full, I found myself really exhausted by lectures and the amount of time I had to spend sitting and concentrating. I also found it hugely frustrating to feel as though I was back to where I had been 5 years ago and felt very out of control of my health.

When it was time for our placement allocation, I was placed in a paediatric setting which was an hour's drive away. While this would previously not have been a problem for me, I found myself really struggling with driving long distances due to my condition. I also had doubts about working with children, simply because I knew they would have a lot more energy than I did at that stage! The thought of driving 2 hours everyday, driving around the community and having to chase after children filled me with absolute dread and I didn't know what to do. I really felt that I would let myself and everyone around me down but didn't want to admit how much pain I was in. I also found it difficult because everyone on the course wanted to discuss placement and how excited they were. I felt quite sad that I wasn't excited and that I was being held back by something which was out of my control.

During one of my physiotherapy sessions, I discussed my concerns about placement with the physio and he suggested that either I was put on another placement or intercalated. At that point in time, I knew that intercalation wasn't the right thing for me, although I fully support those who decide that it is for them. I spoke to several SLT lecturers at UEA about the situation and was overwhelmed by how supportive they were. Even though I had notified them only a few weeks before placement, they arranged for me to live in hospital accommodation which significantly reduced my commute and offered me so much support. I am so grateful for this as I now know that I would have been unable to complete my placement without these amendments and the support offered to me by UEA.

Following recommendations from my placement coordinator, I made the decision to notify my educators about my condition in advance. This is something that I found quite difficult to do, but would really recommend any student to do the same. I've always been an actress when it's come to my health and always pretend that I'm fine even when I'm not. Throughout this academic year, I've

learnt that nobody is superwoman and setting ridiculously high standards for yourself can be really detrimental. It was much easier on the first day of placement to walk in and know that your educator was already aware of the condition rather than keep pretending for 8 weeks.

I remember finding the first two days of placement really difficult. I struggled healthwise with pain levels and exhaustion and put a huge amount of pressure to perform to the level of the other students on my placement (I was on a group peer placement). I really questioned whether I would be able to complete the placement but felt too embarrassed and frustrated to tell anybody. However, on the third day, I saw my first client and realised that working with children who just wanted to play and be happy would be the perfect distraction for me and really helped take my mind off my pain.

Throughout my whole placement, my educator could not have been more supportive. From day one, she assured me that I could take off the time needed for medical appointments or rest and that she was 100% behind me. My only regret was that I wasn't always fully honest as to how unwell I was feeling, simply because it isn't always something I find easy to discuss. At an interim assessment, I received feedback that sometimes I could seem quite closed and reserved. I felt frustrated with myself because I knew that that appearance had been due to the level of pain that I had experienced on those days. I now realise that I should have been honest. Following this, I was much more up front about my difficulties with my educator. I was admitted to hospital for treatment and felt really reassured that my educator was aware of this and so knew that I might find it difficult to keep up with my work that week.

It makes a huge difference having an educator who is supportive of health difficulties, and I would urge all educators to express this support at the earliest possible stage. It's also important to bear in mind that some students, such as myself, may not always give you the full story but just knowing that you are there is sometimes enough.

My advice for students doing placement with a health condition or disability would be the following; don't be afraid to ask for help, either at university or on placement. At the end of the day, nobody is perfect and you owe it to yourself and other people not to struggle on alone. Secondly, don't worry about anybody else. Think of placement as a marathon not a sprint; take each day as it comes. It doesn't matter how other people are finding it, because they're not in your shoes. So please ignore all of the facebook statuses about what a fantastic time your peers are having on placement and save your energy to look after yourself. Most of all, stay strong. Doing a placement when you're not in a good place healthwise is not a walk in the park, there are days when it is really tough. If you are able to find the strength to keep going through those days, you really will be able to do anything. Ultimately, those of us who are healthcare professionals with our own health difficulties will have a fantastic level of empathy which cannot be taught or

learnt through reading textbooks. While I have had days on placement that have been really tough, ultimately I am really proud of myself for making it through the 8 week placement, against the odds and feel reassured that whatever the future holds healthwise, I will have the strength to be the best that I can be at my job.

I cannot thank the SLT staff at UEA, my educators, family and friends enough for supporting me throughout and helping me stay strong to accomplish what I really am capable of.