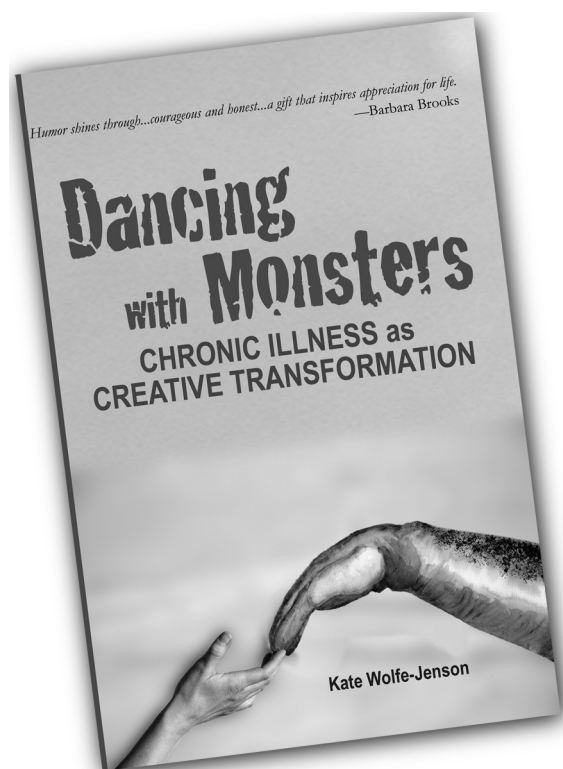


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www.dancingwithmonsters.com



20 Tips for



How to Experience Chronic Illness as Creative Transformation

*A Practical Companion
to the book,
Dancing With Monsters*

When it comes to dealing with chronic illness, we have few cultural models that can help us. We can't be conquering heroes because the disease may not go away. We can't go gently into the good night because the disease may not kill us.

If you have a chronic illness, it means you are also chronically healing. There are parallels between the creative process and the process of living with chronic illness.

Dealing with chronic illness is a creative project: chronic healing.

Chronic healing is dancing with the chronic illness monster.

I think of my journey as four movements that spiral around skip and dance.

1. **Overwhelm**
2. **Incubation**
3. **Reconciliation**
4. **Rededication**

About Creative Experiments

Because creative activity helps me understand and process my thoughts and feelings, I enjoy experimenting with ways that making and arranging marks, sounds, movements, words, objects and dialogues can teach me about my life.

Rules For Creative Experiments

(and possibly for life in general)

- Use the materials and spaces of your choice: fancy or plain, special or ordinary, comfortable or challenging. It may help to pretend you're a little kid.
- Do what you like (or change it so you *do like it*) and leave the rest.
- Just once, try doing the one that seems most outside your comfort zone.
- Be gentle with yourself.
- Have fun.

Overwhelm



Something changes (physically or mentally) and we have trouble coping with that change.

Things are not quite what they used to be. We experience new symptoms. We prepare ourselves for pain or disappointment. These subtle sensations can become so powerful that they cannot be ignored. We find it hard to pay attention to anything except physical sensations and the mental and emotional baggage that comes with them.

How is this creative?

The creative process often starts with an idea without clear understanding of how to take action. For example, we face a blank sheet of paper. The project demands our attention, but leaves us baffled.

Five Tips for Overwhelm

1 **Focus on the facts.** To avoid getting lost in the fear of what *might* be happening, say out loud what *is* happening. For example: instead of thinking, "oh no, here comes a horrible migraine!" say out loud "I feel moderate pain in the back right of my head."

2 **Take five slow breaths.** Focus on the sensation of the air moving in and out of your nostrils, in and out of your belly. Returning to the present moment helps calm your emotions.

3 **Take action as needed.** How have you gotten relief from similar symptoms in the past? Did it help to stretch your muscles, take a nap, take medication?

4 **Ask for help.** Are there actions others can take that will help you feel better? Identify a specific action and ask them to do it. Possibilities include doing a task for you, giving you a hug, giving you a massage, playing music, listening to you talk, making a call for you.

5 **Try This Creative Experiment:** *Write the starter words and then keep going, keeping the words coming one after another even if you're writing "I don't know what to say next, but if I did..."*

Start with: "When it gets to be too much, I..."



Incubation

Sometimes we have to give in and be sick. For hours (sometimes days and, occasionally, weeks) we exist, dulled by pain or disability. We are simply surviving and waiting.

How is this creative?

Once we start a creative process, we may reach a point where we get stuck and need to let the project incubate while we do something else. For example, we make marks on the paper and are unhappy with the results. We take a break from art to weed the garden.

Five Tips for Incubation

- 1 Pamper yourself:** Get enough rest. Eat your favorite foods (as well as some nourishing ones).
- 2 Connect with a caring friend:** Talk with someone you know will brighten your day. Watch your energy: keep the visit short.
- 3 Contemplate something beautiful:** Gaze at a beautiful flower, a favorite pet, or a treasured object. Listen to music you love.
- 4 Find something to laugh about:** Watch your favorite funny movie or TV show. Read a funny book.
- 5 Try This Creative Experiment:**
Make your body into a pose representing the idea: adjust your facial expression, how you hold your head and torso, how you position your arms and legs. Once you have the pose, begin to move out of it. Let how fast you move, how you move and how you're using the space grow from the idea.
You are an ice sculpture on a warm day. Is this a story of defeat or homecoming?



Reconciliation

We start discovering what has changed in our lives and begin to make our peace with it.

We return, cautiously, to activity. Even if we expect to regain our earlier level of functioning, we have to integrate the experience of being ill into our lives. We begin, slowly, to build relationship with our changed selves. We experiment to find out what works and what doesn't.

How is this creative?

We return to the project with new energy. Marks on paper or canvas lead to more marks. We no longer feel stuck. The project takes on a life of its own.

Five Tips for Reconciliation

1 Move your body: Gently return to physical activity. Walk, stretch, wiggle.

2 Identify the changes: Pay attention to what has changed for you, physically, mentally and emotionally. Has your ability to move or your energy level changed? Do you see yourself differently? Are you grieving losses? Feeling relief?

3 Make room for the changes: Make a list of five things you could do to make your life easier or more comfortable. Do you need to rearrange your furniture? Your schedule? Do you need to do less of some activity that drains your energy and do more of something you enjoy?

4 Get help from the experts: If your level of functioning has changed, consult health workers (doctors, physical , occupational or psychological therapists, etc.) to get ideas about strengthening what you have and/or adapting your environment to fit your new needs.

5 Try This Creative Experiment:
With the mark-making utensils of your choice (color adds meaning and fun), make marks in response to the suggestion. Be as sketchy—or as elaborate—as you want to be.

Make strong, independent marks. Make vulnerable, dependent marks. Combine them to create something new.

Rededication



We accept our changed selves and move toward joyful expression.

As we become able to accept ourselves, we begin to open to our souls. We begin to express who we are. We rededicate ourselves to those things that are important to us. We begin to do what gives us joy.

How is this creative?

We express our ideas in creative form in an attempt to communicate them to others.

Five Tips for Rededication

1 Identify what gives you joy: Remember three things you used to find joyful.

Identify what made them ring your bells. Find a way of doing them now or incorporating what made them great into your life. You may need to experiment to find out what works and what doesn't.

2 Connect with a fun person: Call a friend or family member who makes you smile.

Invite them to surprise you with a fun outing or activity.

3 Entertain your favorite sense: Eat something scrumptious. Listen to something lovely. Look at something beautiful. Smell something luscious. Touch something glorious.

4 Find delight: Each day, identify your Delight of the Day. It can be anything that brings you a moment of joy. Watch for it! Give thanks for it!

5 Try This Creative Experiment: *Start with a rhythm—clap or tap on a surface. Add a repetitive sound—pitch, volume and duration are up to you. If you're a musician, feel free to use an instrument. If you're "not a musician," use your voice and body to make noise. Break free of the repetition and experiment.*

Sound like chaos. Sound like protection.

Sound like openness. Sound like celebration.