

Education matters

Louise Rock outlines a survival guide for young people who are worried about their education



In November of 1995 I undertook one of the hardest decisions of my life. At fifteen years old I dropped out of school for a few months, leaving the friends I had and my classes in order to rest.

Over the past year I had felt like I was watching my education slip through my fingers as doctors and parents used every incentive they could think of to get me to attend school. I used to sit in bed watching the time go by, as I fell further behind, thinking about the classes I was missing and the work that would be brought home to me – the work which I had no strength to do.

Anyone who has been through this knows that it hurts to see your education slipping away along with your friends and your future aspirations – feeling a desperation to stop this decline into an unknown abyss but not knowing how to. Education can quickly become a nightmarish vicious circle ... absence means catching up when better, catching up means that you feel worse and so are absent again.

Throughout January of 1996, I toyed with the idea of re-doing year ten in September. At first I thought that it would be far too humiliating as I would be a great deal older than anyone else, plus I would see the friends who had forsaken me the year before, constantly reminding me of my losses, my illness and my inability.

However, the more I thought about it, the more it made sense to have another chance at my GCSEs. Luckily I repeated the year with understanding teachers and a home tutor who helped get me work from school when I was absent. Firstly I went to school for four periods a week and I gradually built that up to whole days. This type of selective graduated study gives you a sense of being at school and doing some form of work but also means that you are not thrown in the deep end, which could lead to a relapse.

When returning to school, do not let the teachers bully you to attend, or push you too hard. It's essential that you let them know you have ME and that they understand exactly what this means in relation to your schooling. It really helps to have an understanding carer who is willing to talk to your teachers on your behalf (Thanks Mum!)

If your social life is taken away by illness, it can be very depressing, so I think it's very important to have contact with the outside world. What helped me

was discovering penfriends through ME publications. Friends who suffer the same way as you are great to have. They pick you up when you're down, and understand exactly how you feel, as they have been through it all before.

Something that you should never do is push yourself, ignoring the signs that you are ill, to make people happy. If you tell others of your predicament so that they can understand your limits, they will respect you for it.

When studying at home, I have learnt that pushing myself to the very limits is physically and mentally draining. It's better to graduate your study to a timetable that does not push you over into days in bed. When you feel like you have had enough... stop and rest.

Through graduated study I managed to gain five GCSEs and I am currently studying for my A levels. I am still far from 100% healthy – in fact I take many days and half days off school, but gradually I feel like I'm getting there. Don't be ashamed of going back to school or college later, or of studying in a different way to your classmates. Remember that education is flexible and if you have the confidence and willpower, you can get it to work for you.