

WHAT I WISH PROFESSORS KNEW ABOUT MIGRAINE DISEASE

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I used to lay down with my face pressed against really gross, cold, hard linoleum floors, with my eyes closed, attempting to listen to lectures by my professors from just outside classroom doors when I was in college. Often.

Looking like a hungover college student

Any unsuspecting passerby might without further investigation think that I was just another hungover college student, tired and dehydrated from the previous night out, but perhaps disappointingly to the party-inclined, it was usually just another migraine. I would also usually end up in a professor's office hours some short time after, discussing that I'd missed something, some important fact, or a part of an assignment's directions, again. Having migraine disease often made me feel as though I came off as a terrible student, and there are things I wish I'd shared with my professors about what it was like to struggle academically while dealing with migraine disease. Here are a few of them:

Please don't assume I'm lazy or not interested in school

It can be difficult to ask for help when dealing with chronic pain, I wish my professors didn't assume that because I sought accommodation or had to leave class often that I was lazy or academically disinterested.

My experience with learning was quite the opposite of lazy and academically disinterested, especially towards the latter part of pursuing my undergraduate degree. I loved learning new information, writing challenging papers, and engaging in discussions on interesting concepts in a lot of my classes. I often felt like I needed to prove to my professors that I could be a really great student despite my migraines, and that usually meant for me that I was asking for clarification or for something to be repeated. But some of the time, I did things to accommodate my pain that professors scoffed at, commented on, or outright disallowed. While on the surface, having my head down, having my eyes closed, or worst of all, leaving class altogether may seem like disrespect towards an instructor, for me, these were steps I had to take to remain engaged while being attentive to my health. A one size fits all glove when it comes to expectations for attentiveness and respect in the classroom can leave those dealing with an invisible disease such as migraine feeling singled out and mischaracterized. I wish my professors knew that I was trying, even when it didn't seem like it.

Additionally, telling every professor about your chronic pain can be exhausting and embarrassing, I wish my professors knew that when I shared sensitive information with them about chronic pain, it was with discretion and intentionality, not to make an excuse.

Migraine is not just a headache

Migraines are more than 'just headaches', and can last for longer than you think. For those suffering from a migraine, being told to take a tylenol and get over it is probably one of the most eye-roll inducing comments one could hear. Migraine symptoms can be debilitating, can cause dizziness and weakness, and may even require additional support from others just to move—expecting a student to just suck it up and move on is unrealistic, I wish my professors knew that when I had multiple day migraines, that those days usually involved multiple recovery tasks, and that sometimes it took a long time to recover from more than just a 'measly headache'. Over the course of those days, concentrating and performing all the tasks it takes to be a 'good' student can feel like a very steep battle.

Please understand the need to leave the classroom

Migraines can make you vomit. Rules about when a student is allowed to be excused are ableist.

Rules that determine how much freedom a student has over their own body, such as 'students can only leave once per class', 'no bathroom breaks', or any sort of rule in which a student is trapped in a classroom always made me feel very anxious. Rules such as these are ableist and they single out students who have to take care of their minds and bodies round the clock. I wish professors did not assume ownership over student's bodies and time and instead allowed for students to take care of the business they need to without the associated stigma that comes with leaving the classroom.



Migraine is disabling

Migraines often are not treated as validly as other disabilities on campuses.

In college, I was a notetaker for other students living with disabilities for a few of my classes and I used to constantly think that my migraines weren't serious enough to warrant me having a notetaker, when ironically there were many days when I couldn't see, let alone write down notes, because of my migraine disease. I wish campuses, professors, and students alike knew more about migraines, so that people on campuses dealing with them could feel comfortable getting the support they needed such as notetaking assistance.