

KICKING SICK

your GO-TO GUIDE for thriving
with chronic health conditions

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sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

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1

What's Amy Got to Do With It?

"Amy!"

"Amy!"

"Amy, honey! Get up, sweetheart. Everything will be okay."

My parents were talking to me, but all I heard were their muffled voices as I lay crumpled on the floor of a prominent specialist's office, tears gushing, my body wracking and shuddering in despair and sadness. The doctor's words echoed in my ears: "Your colon doesn't work; it's totally shot. I have no idea why. You're most likely never going to be able to have a bowel movement on your own ever again. One of the very few options you have is to remove it." Living with a nonfunctioning colon was not part of my life plan. Nor was struggling for five years looking for answers. At first it felt as though my heart had plummeted down a deep, dark, long hole. And then I was numb.

That moment was my rock bottom.

Let me tell you how I got there. I grew up the youngest of three girls in a suburb just outside Philadelphia. My dad is a doctor, my mom is an artist, and there was a lot of love,

laughter, and happy times in our family. I was always on the go, constantly trying to keep up with my older sisters. I was active, playing outside, taking dance classes, singing, swimming, hula hooping, riding my bike, doing arts and crafts, playing pranks on my sister, chasing fireflies in the summertime, and just feeling free. I loved life. I never wanted to miss out on anything.

One night after dance class, I ran upstairs straight to my room. I wanted to do my homework as quickly as possible so I could go back to practicing my dance moves. As I bent down to get my math textbook off the floor, I felt a shooting pain go from the base of my spine all the way up to the top—*clang*, like the disk hitting the bell on a strongman carnival game. I had never felt pain of that caliber before. I couldn't move. Bent over at the waist and frozen that way, I waddled down the hall into my dad's study and cried out, "Daddy, I can't move." He knelt down and held me.

I rested my back for a few days in an attempt to get over the profound spasm. Afterward, I tried to resume my life, but I was

never that active, free-spirited, spritely little girl again. I couldn't be. My lower back hurt constantly, and that ran the show from that textbook moment on, for the next eleven years of my life. I tried to dance again, and it hurt too much. I tried to go to field hockey camp with a friend as I had planned, and I couldn't move from the pain I was in. The doctors said, "Don't do it if it hurts," so I stopped doing most of the things I was used to doing freely because of a physical condition that was on the rise, whether I wanted it to be or not.

There was a nerve component to the problem with my back. Basically, it felt as if the nerves in my low back were jumping out of my skin. If I took a walk, I would feel pain. If I played Nintendo with my friends, I would feel pain. If I just sat on the couch, I would feel pain. When I lay in bed at night,

I would feel pain. My body was saying, "Something isn't right here. Pay attention." But I didn't know that. How could I? I was just a child.

As a fourteen-year-old girl with debilitating back pain, I was thrust into a scary adult world of dealing with a chronic illness. I had an illness before I had time to truly have a full childhood. While my friends were going to dance class and playing sports after school, I was going from doctor to doctor, trying to find a solution for the nearly unbearable pain I was in and to understand why I wasn't at home in my body anymore. I was constantly unsettled in my skin. With time, my free spirit and I disconnected.

From the moment I crawled into my dad's home office on all fours, he, my mom, and I were together on a journey. My parents tried



The young me: before my illness, I was an active child who loved life.

the best they could with what they knew. They were with me all the way. This was new for all of us. My dad used all of his resources to get me in to see the best specialists in town. I saw the best of the best. My mother was the schlepper and the nurturer; she was by my side everywhere, holding my hand, kissing me, stroking my hair, keeping me giggling, and supporting me.

We tried everything: physical therapy, back braces, TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation) machines, chiropractic care, massage, and the application of ice and heat to the affected areas. None of it worked. It seemed to be a mysterious condition that no one understood. Despite all the treatments and tests, there were no clues as to the root cause of the pain.

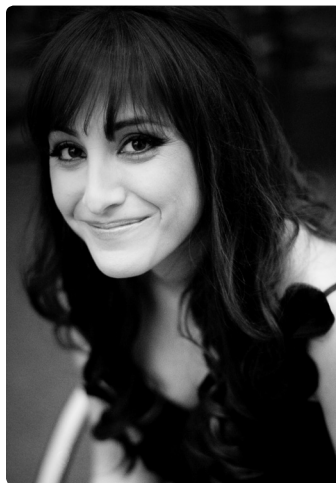
Finally, I was put on painkillers three times a day, plus a pill to calm my nerves once

a day, and another pill to relax my muscles at night. *When I was fourteen!* These meds were part of my daily routine through middle and high school, and I continued taking them through college. They seemed to work. They numbed the condition—at least for a while. Wasn't taking all those medications the right thing to do because they “worked”? After all, a medical doctor prescribed them. Pain was at the forefront of who I, Amy Kurtz, was. It defined me. I considered it to be “my normal.”

But I was also aware that this part of me was different from my friends. I knew that my friends didn't have pain issues. I just thought I was the unfortunate one.

I went to college for a degree in the performing arts and had the dream of being an actor. My body made me feel caged, and acting was the one thing that let me escape

I grew up looking healthy, and no one could tell I wasn't well. From my senior year high school photo (2003) and two photos taken at my sister's wedding (2009), you wouldn't know how much pain I was in or how much medication I was taking to feel “normal.”



my reality and express myself freely. I was still always in pain. On top of it, I got the mononucleosis virus my sophomore year. I was so sick I had to move home for the remainder of the semester. I crawled right back into my childhood bed and stayed there until the start of the next semester. Some friends also got mono, but never as severely as I did. I knew it presented itself less severely in them, but I didn't understand why. I never fully recovered from the mono virus, and after that, my back pain kicked me with a new vengeance.

The pain pills had started being less effective as the years went by. Sometime after I got sick with mono, they stopped working entirely. Unless I took even more medication, I would pretty much always have pain. This was devastating because it affected everything—my classwork, my social life, my relationships, my ability to do anything. I was always trying to act like a normal young person, but the reality was I was no such being. Taking heavy-duty pills all the time definitely inspires you to see yourself as sick—and they certainly don't make you feel “better.”

The older I got, the more I realized the problem wasn't being fixed by the pills; they were masking a big problem, which was only getting worse. I longed to feel a different way. I longed to no longer feel helpless and physically debilitated. I so wanted to find a way to truly help myself—maybe a healthier lifestyle would make my pain more bearable.

So I decided to show up for my life in a way I hadn't and see if there were any lifestyle changes I could make that might help.

I saw a nutritionist, incorporated whole foods into my diet, and discovered juicing. I ate a lot of veggies and very few processed foods. Essentially, I cut out the crap. Interestingly enough, the changes I made to my diet meant I was mostly eating gluten-free foods. My back pain almost disappeared, and I thought I had discovered the key to the kingdom. It felt great to feel in control and to be able to slowly taper off the medications and move more normally, without constantly being aware of the pain I felt at every moment. All in all, I was doing my version of well. I began planning a move to Los Angeles to pursue my acting goals.

Before I made my big move, I went abroad to Israel. I had fond memories of a trip I had made with my family to my ancestral and spiritual homeland when I was seven. I was



Me in the hospital right after getting back from Israel, after gaining thirty pounds in thirty days.

looking forward to going back as an adult. What began as an exciting adventure to a foreign country ended up as a physical and emotional horror story. I had a total body shutdown during my stay. I was on an organized trip that included a meal plan, and there weren't a lot of healthy food options available. It was slim pickins', and nothing matched the healthy diet I had been eating at home. The offerings included mostly pita bread and hummus. The back pain I had endured my whole life reemerged, times ten. It wasn't just pain this time; my whole body started reacting in a way I had never experienced before—and quickly. When I was seven years old on my first trip to Israel, I climbed the Masada with adults, and I kept up, felt great, and impressed everyone around me with my youthful agility. Now, at twenty-five, I was struggling to keep up with the elderly people on the hike. I looked in front and in back of me and realized

I was the slowest person in the group, lagging way behind everyone. I couldn't catch my breath; I was literally gasping for air, feeling as though I were going to faint.

I gained thirty pounds in thirty days. I had rashes all over my skin; I couldn't keep down any solid food or go to the bathroom. My hair was falling out in clumps, I still couldn't catch my breath, my limbs felt like they were aching off my body, and I had dark black circles under my eyes. My body was completely failing me.

My intention to take a fun trip abroad, come back to the States, and head to the sunny skies of LA and land a speaking part in a movie was busted wide open. Instead, I came back to Philadelphia, walked right back into my childhood bedroom, got under the covers, and sank into total fear, isolation, and desperation.

I was so ill upon my arrival home I could barely muster the strength to stand up and

Waiting to have some more tests done.
Age 27



At the Mayo Clinic after my ninth medical test of the day. In good spirits, looking forward to some answers!
Age 29

walk. I could not eat anything but liquids: shakes, smoothies, and soups, which, coincidentally, were gluten- and dairy-free, so my back pain subsided. Yet I remained so fragile, fatigued, and achy. My hair continued falling out in clumps, I was breaking out in hives as if I were allergic to myself, and I didn't have a bowel movement for an entire month.

During this period, my brain started telling me it was time to go big or go home. I began my quest to find out what was wrong. In addition to my dramatic symptoms came a myriad of diagnoses: a severe parasite infection picked up on my trip abroad, chronic fatigue syndrome, heavy metal poisoning, thyroid disorder, Lyme disease, a slow-transit motility disorder of the colon, small intestinal bacterial overgrowth (SIBO), *and* celiac disease. I was no longer absorbing food or nutrients, I couldn't keep any food down, and I couldn't go to the bathroom. My whole body was in shutdown mode. My gastric system, which had been working so hard for so long and fighting itself at such a deep level, said, "Strike three, you are out!"

I went full speed ahead, in total crisis mode, to seeing everyone and anyone who I thought might have some answers. I went to an assortment of conventional doctors, following all their recommendations to the letter because I was so desperate to get better and get on with my life. I researched every possible cause for my afflictions, like an overzealous junkie on

a frantic mission to feed her fix. It was like throwing spaghetti at the wall and seeing what strands would stick. I tried to get better until the point of complete exhaustion—emotionally, physically, and mentally.

Finally, I took a big, long break from all of it, and then I figured out what was real *to me*. Up until this exhausted and extreme state in my life, I was listening to everyone *but me*. It was time for me to start showing up for my own life. It was also time to stop believing that one doctor would have the magic answer and to instead find a reliable, go-to health team. A great deal of research and reading was required to find the right healing path for me. I was very aware that my condition was severe and that I needed to find the correct specialists for my conditions—and quickly. I had grown up thinking that Western medicine was the only kind of medicine that existed. I believe Western medicine is important and has helped me a great deal, but I also wanted to learn about everything else that was out there. I started to explore alternative healing modalities and became interested in the idea of combining many different approaches to healing. I went from one extreme to the next, but I slowly started to figure out a balance, including the healing philosophies that made sense for *me*.

Eventually I found a doctor who correctly diagnosed why I had been plagued with back pain for so many years: celiac disease. In the

1990s, when my pain started, no doctor ever suggested the pain could be food related. Flash forward to the 2000s, and doctors began to realize that gluten and other foods could be the root cause of human disease and disorders. The celiac did not cause every symptom I'd experienced, but it was the cause for my back pain, and it certainly made my body into the perfect host for all the other things that happened to me—including an actual parasite (ew!). Two days after I eliminated gluten from my diet, my back pain was gone forever, as if it had never existed. The pain disappeared just as it had before, when I had inadvertently eliminated gluten from my diet.

I've gone from being a tween in chronic pain to a pill-popping young woman to a woman in charge of her own health and wellness. One thing I learned along the way is that suffering from a chronic health condition should not define who I am. I also learned that I am not alone in my experience. There are so many people out there who, just like me, are dealing with chronic health conditions. One out of every two people in America has at least one.¹

I didn't get to a place of healing all by myself. I had a lot of help, including medical practitioners and wellness workers who held my hand and were my parachutes throughout my journey. These heroes include Mark Hyman, MD, a functional medicine specialist and founder of the UltraWellness Center and

the director of the Cleveland Clinic Center for Functional Medicine; Gerard Mullin, MD, a top gastroenterologist at Johns Hopkins Hospital; Philip Felig, MD, a top endocrinologist; maharishi Thom Knoles; Lauren Handel Zander, cofounder and chair of Handel Group; and others. When I began to think about writing a book for other women with chronic health conditions, I knew that insights from these members of my personal "A-team" would help others as much as they had helped me.

I also knew it was important to include wisdom from my favorite thought leaders—people whose wisdom, philosophy, and approach to life's challenges brought me key "aha moments" and helped me navigate my journey with more grace and ease. These "favorites" include *New York Times* bestselling author and speaker Gabrielle Bernstein; multiple *New York Times* bestselling author, wellness advocate, and cancer thriver Kris Carr; renowned yogi and author Elena Brower; psychologist and fear guru Terri Cole; tapping expert Jessica Ortner; and others.

Finally, I have found a tribe of women who are thriving and succeeding despite the chronic issues they have learned to manage with grace, understanding, and yes, even humor. I call them Glow Warriors: champions of the good life who have kicked the *sick* label, risen above their conditions, and constantly remind me that happiness and healing

is possible no matter what my situation. I decided their wisdom and words deserved to be in my book too because it's reassuring to know that, if you have one or more chronic conditions, you're in great company and that all of us, no matter our struggles, can learn to bloom and flourish in so many ways.

Here are the most important things I want you to know: First, you really aren't alone. I

know what you are going through, I've felt what you feel, and I've got your back. Second, healing is a journey not a destination, and you need your time, love, and attention. Third, it's time to radically accept where you are at in this exact moment and make the choice to start thriving. And I believe if you're reading this book, you're ready. The time is now.

Let's kick it!



★ Meet The Glow Warriors

THESE INSPIRING WOMEN remind us that happiness and healing are possible no matter what your situation. These ladies have graciously shared their wisdom throughout the pages of this book.



*Kaitlyn
Lennon*

DIAGNOSIS Polyarticular
Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA)

AGE OF DIAGNOSIS 17

OCCUPATION Client relationship manager
by day, artist and crafter by night

OUTLOOK ON HEALING Be gentle
with yourself, both body and mind. Pain
is inevitable; suffering is optional.

**THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSON I'VE
LEARNED FROM MY HEALTH JOURNEY**

RA has been one of my greatest teachers, and living with it has had a surprisingly positive impact on my inner growth. It has shaped so much of who I have become, and I am very grateful for the wisdom it has imbued. The need for self-care that comes along with chronic illness has opened me up to practices, people, and experiences that I otherwise would have never pursued. Living with ongoing physical pain also connects us to others in a way that is easy to overlook when things are easy and comfortable. The compassion this inspires is, I feel, one of the most important and precious qualities we can possess and act from as human beings.