

A letter for my friends

I have Parkinson's disease. It is not catching or hereditary. No-one knows what causes it, but some of the dopamine cells in the brain begin to die at an accelerated rate. Everyone slowly loses some dopamine cells as they grow older. If the cells suddenly begin to die at a faster rate, Parkinson's disease develops. It is a slowly progressive disease, usually occurring as people get older. Medicine can help. I'll take newer, stronger kinds over the years. Some make me sick and take lots of adjustment. Stick with me. I have good days and my bad days.

EMOTIONS – Sometimes I cry and appear to be upset and you think you have done something to hurt my feelings. Probably not. It is the Parkinson's. Keep talking to me. Ignore the tears. I'll be OK in a few minutes.

TREMORS – You are expecting me to shake. Maybe I do, maybe I don't. Medicine today takes care of some of the tremors. If my hands, feet or head are shaky, ignore it. I'll sit on my hand or put it in my pocket. Treat me as you always have. What is a little shakiness between friends?

MY FACE – You think you don't entertain me anymore because I'm not grinning or laughing. If I appear to stare at you, or have a wooden expression, that's the Parkinson's. I hear you. I have the same intelligence. It just isn't easy to show facial expressions. If swallowing is a problem, I may drool. This bothers me, so we'll mop it up.

STIFFNESS – We are ready to go somewhere and as I get up, I can hardly move. Maybe my medicine is wearing off. This stiffness or rigidity is part of the Parkinson's. Let me take my time. Keep talking. I'll get there eventually. Trying to hurry me won't help. I can't hurry. I must take my time. If I seem jerky when I first start out, that's normal. It will lessen as I get moving.

EXERCISE – I need to walk each day. Two or three miles is good. Walk with me. Company makes walking fun. It may be a slow walk, but I'll get there. Remind me if I slump or stoop. I don't always know I'm doing this. My stretching, bending, pushing exercises must be done every day. Help with them if you can.

MY VOICE – As my deeper tones disappear, you'll notice my voice getting higher and wispy. That's the Parkinson's. Listen to me. I know you can talk louder, faster and finish my sentences for me. I hate that! Let me talk, get my thoughts together and speak for myself. I'm still there. My mind is OK. Since I'm slower in movement, my thoughts are slower too. I want to be part of the conversation. Let me speak.

SLEEPLESSNESS – I may complain that I can't sleep. If I wander around in the middle of the night, that's the Parkinson's. It has nothing to do with what I ate or how early I went to bed. I may nap during the day. Let me sleep when I can. I can't always control when I'm tired or feel like sleeping.

Patience my friend. I need you. I'm the same person. I've slowed down. It's not easy to talk about Parkinson's, but I'll try if you really want to know. I need my friends. I want to continue to be part of life. Please remain my friend. To me that says it all.