Spoon Theory

Spoon theory is a commonly used metaphor for describing the energy limitations and activity restrictions of chronic illness. It was first established by Christine Miserandino, who has lupus, when she was meeting a friend at a diner. The friend curiously asked Christine what having lupus is like, and Christine looked around the table for a tangible way to explain her every-day life and her eyes landed on the spoons at her table.

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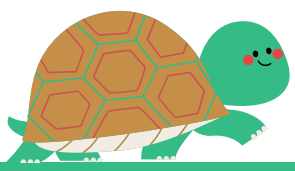
Imagine spoons as units of energy. Each day you wake up with a handful of spoons in your hand, ready to spend throughout the day as you go about your tasks and activities. Some tasks and activities demand more spoons than others. You wake up with roughly the same amount of spoons to use from day to day.

A healthy person who has no disability or chronic illnesses wakes up with huge fistfuls of spoons. As they go about their day, their activities cost them spoons - 1 spoon for breakfast, 1 spoon for a shower and getting dressed, 1 spoon for their commute, 5 spoons for work all day, 3 spoons for after work activities and so on. Because they started their day with so many spoons, they even tend to have some left over when they go to sleep at night.

However, a person with a chronic illness wakes up with only half a handful of spoons. They have to decide very carefully which activities they can spend those spoons on, in case they run out completely. This might mean skipping a shower, or being unable to work, or having to decide between making a meal and doing some exercise. Often, if they run out of spoons for the day, they might have to borrow spoons from the next day and instead wake up the next morning with a spoon debt and a worsening of their symptoms. Or their spoons have been used in the morning and they can no longer do anything in the afternoon and evening and instead need to rest because of the limitations of their chronic illness.

The difficulty with the energy of a chronically ill person is that the amount of spoons per day can fluctuate immensely depending on spoon debt from previous days, or getting a virus, or having a chronic illness flare. People with a chronic illness cannot often predict how many spoons they will have available on a day in the future, which to other people often looks like flakiness or laziness.



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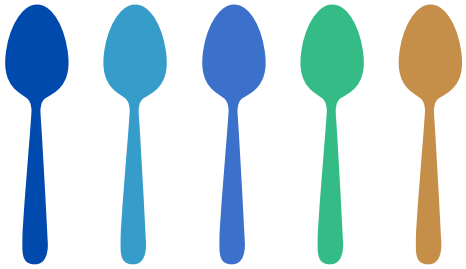


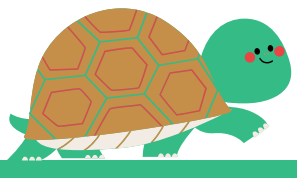
Spoon theory describes how disabled or chronically ill people (or 'spoonies') face tough choices everyday about how they spend their very precious and limited energy. This includes the choice about whether they can work much or even at all. Healthy people have the luxury of not having to think about how they spend their energy, or how the activities they do on one day might effect the next few.

Spoon Theory and Pacing

Pacing for chronic illness is a collection of strategies that can help you to make the most of the small number of spoons you have each day and prevent you from having to borrow from future days too. Emerge ACT have a number of courses and resources that can help you learn how to pace well for your unique situation and begin to have a more stable, predictable and enjoyable life within the limits of your chronic illness.

Information in this factsheet is adapted from the Spoon Theory page at MEpedia and an essay by Christine Miserandino titled "The Spoon Theory" on her blog site "But You Don't Look Sick?":
https://www.butyoudontlooksick.com/articles/written-by-christine/the-spoon-theory/
https://me-pedia.org/wiki/Spoon_theory

This factsheet is part of our Club Tortoise program for pacing with energy-limiting conditions.



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