

# How Six Weeks of Bed Rest Made Me a Better Mom

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My daughter is one of the most important people in my life, but she's never going to be "my whole life." Having a chronic illness helped me realize that and become a better parent.

By Bridget Shirvell December 09, 2019



The author and her daughter.

| Credit: Courtesy of Bridget Shirvell

The first snowfall of the season briefly transformed our neighborhood into a winter fairyland. I'd been waiting for it, dreaming of venturing outside with my 1-year-old daughter, watching her face while she experienced the snowfall, and maybe eventually making our way to pick out a Christmas tree. But instead of making me giddy, the snow outside our windows hit me with both a sense of longing and an acquiescence that this just wasn't our year.

In the midst of my third ulcerative colitis (UC) flare-up in less than 10 months, the simple act of putting on socks in the morning was exhausting, and I knew going outside in the snow with a toddler would be an impossible undertaking.

There have been so many moments in the first 13 months of my daughter's life when I look at her and with a dazed smile think, "I can't believe she's ours." There's been laughter and joy and sleepless nights and the stress of figuring out how to be parents. But it's been my UC—an inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) that causes long-lasting inflammation and ulcers in your digestive tract—that helped me reinforce the type of parent I want to be.

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I was diagnosed when I was 19 and my disease had mostly stayed under control for more than a decade. Yes, there would be days I'd get tired easily and have sore joints and always have to be meticulous come cold and flu season, but outside of that and a few minor flares, I was mostly symptom-free.

All that changed when my daughter was 5 months old and I had the first of what would become recurring severe flares. A colonoscopy would also find an unrelated rare tumor in my intestines that would require a difficult balancing act of being well enough to not need my UC meds to have a surgery to remove it, and then six weeks of rest that included no picking up my daughter or anything over 15 pounds. Think of all the things that require picking up a child—into and out of a stroller, car seat, crib, away from the dog, to soothe. I panicked and briefly put the surgery off. But then I used my condition to take a step back from parenting, and it's something I don't feel guilty about.

That could be because of my own childhood. My parents always made me feel loved and valued, and they still do—just last week my mom spent a day driving me to doctor's appointments because I didn't think I could manage it. But my parents were also two people with their own desires, interests, and career goals. Some of my favorite childhood memories are of when they'd go on vacation and leave us with a rotating group of babysitting family members. And maybe it's because just like my parents, I have dreams, wants, and aspirations that are separate from my daughter, and I'm unwilling to put those aside simply because I'm a momma.

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Credit: Courtesy of Bridget Shirvell

Don't get me wrong, my daughter plays a part in every decision I make whether it's to take on new work, buy a new outfit (I could buy her some adorable outfits instead), or go out to dinner with friends, but it's also important for both of us that she's not the only deciding factor.

Take the surgery that I finally had. I spent a week in a hospital, and she spent a week hanging out with her grandma during the day—taking subway trips, going to Target, playing games, and laughing a lot—and getting solo time with her dad in evenings. When I was home recovering, the two of us played peek-a-boo and read books on the floor while my sister, our nanny, and a family friend took shifts watching her and doing the lifting.

There were days it was hard to not be involved and plenty of times I felt jealous of the activities I couldn't take part in, like watching her leave to go to the park to swing. Yet in the end, I know we're both better for it. I got to recover from the surgery and she got to spend time with some of her favorite people in her young life, strengthening relationships that will only become more important to have as she grows. My husband also got plenty of solo parenting time without me attempting to micromanage it. And I know our friends and family that helped out enjoyed the opportunity to spend time with our daughter.

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As for the snow days, they'll be more of them in our future and in the meantime we can put on Christmas music and play peek-a-boo on the floor until my energy wanes and then she gets time with her dad or aunt.