

8. Adapting To Social Pressures & Ostracism

There's a scene in the movie *Beach*, where a resident of the community living on the island is bitten by a shark and suffers a prolonged period of suffering from his injuries without really improving or worsening. Leo's character astutely observes how intolerant people are when someone has the misfortune of being stuck in that uncomfortable middle ground of pain and suffering. I'm sure this will resonate with anyone who has endured a bout of chronic illness, as it did me. It is quite remarkable how quickly people's patience can run out, which can be particularly disheartening when those people are family members or friends. After 2 weeks of my inactivity and complaining about my invisible pain, I started to feel that the patience of others was running out. If you have a broken leg it is much easier to attract empathy, though when you have no visible evidence of any pain or suffering it is naturally more difficult. Even more so when they discover that doctors couldn't find anything wrong with you. During this period I could not summon the strength to simply walk up the stairs to take a shower so my personal hygiene was far from a high priority. After a gentle reminder from my housemates about the benefits of a daily routine I was vulnerable to taking this as a personal insult, though I soon realised the futility of doing so. With time it dawned on me that this type of social reaction to illness is unavoidable to some extent, perhaps a primal aversion to weakness in others for fear of not wanting to be slowed down by an injured member of the pack. In any case, in my experience it is difficult, if not impossible, for people to understand, let alone empathise, with something they haven't experienced. Try not to take it personally. Learning how to be selfish in some ways helped me, to learn how to exist in my own strange headspace for a while. That became the new normal. The hardest part of adapting was the first few months as I was still trying to hold on to my old lifestyle. Once I really learned to embrace my

new world the whole experience became a lot easier.

I found out quite quickly that some people tended to drain my energy or raise my anxiety levels and others had a more relaxing or positive effect. I started spending a lot more time with my female friends who I guess unsurprisingly seemed a lot more empathetic in nature. And I spent the summer lingering amongst a bunch of European vagabond travellers who kept telling me that I was holding on to the pain, that it was symbolic of some deeper internal conflict that I was failing to address. While I didn't quite accept their proposition, in any event I found their empathy refreshing and comforting. So I guess what saved me was learning to adapt to change and to swiftly let go of any negative interactions in your friendship or family circles. It will no doubt be a timely opportunity to learn who your real friends are and indeed an opportunity to forge new relationships. Relationships that can and should be a source of much needed positive energy in your life. *So when you are feeling let down in a certain social situation, REMEMBER THAT PEOPLE CAN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY HAVEN'T EXPERIENCED – DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY.*