4 Things Not to Say to Someone Living With COPD

by RUSSELL WINWOOD

What Not to Say to Someone With COPD

The physical constraints of COPD are a daily struggle for many patients, but the stigma attached to this disease has been around for many years, and even today there are members of the public who believe it's a smoker's disease, and you deserve it.

How do we change this mentality?

In this article, I discuss what not to say to someone with COPD.

1. It Doesn't Look Like There's Anything Wrong With You.

If you're not on oxygen for a significant time every day, chances are people will look at you and think there's nothing wrong.

COPD can very much be an invisible disease. Unless you spend some time with a patient, it can be hard to identify the symptoms. Many patients only choose to go out in public when they're feeling at their best.

I, like many other patients, will avoid environments which will exacerbate my symptoms.

This can involve not going to the shops, social engagements or simply leaving the house. Because of the need for patients to be diligent with their care, many friends and family never see us at our worst.

Only those who live with us on a daily basis can see the roller coaster ride we go through.

2. You Have COPD, Why Do You Still Smoke?

Unfortunately, some COPD patients even after being diagnosed, find it difficult to quit smoking.

These patients are often targets for abuse because most people cannot understand why someone with lung disease would still participate in an activity which caused their condition.

Yes, this is a rational assumption to make. However, when it comes to an addiction rational doesn't always work.

In my case I had been a smoker for 30 years, I quit because it wasn't right for me. The truth is, I loved smoking. Back when I was smoking, I could never have imagined the world where I wouldn't wake up and have a cup of coffee and a cigarette.

Being diagnosed with a deadly disease doesn't guarantee you'll do everything you're expected to do. Giving up an addictive habit is hard for any person, and sometimes compassion and help is better than judgment.

3. You Smoked Cigarettes; You Deserve to Have COPD.

I remember the first time someone said this to me.

To be honest, I wanted to punch them. I will be the first to acknowledge smoking is partly responsible for my COPD and taking it up was the stupidest thing I've ever done.

Does this mean I deserve to have COPD? There will always be people who answer – yes, you do.

So, when thinking about how I was going to respond to this person who told me I deserved my disease, I put it back on them. This person was overweight and led a sedentary lifestyle. I ask this person if they deserved to have heart disease, diabetes or a stroke because they chose to eat too much and not exercise?

When I put the question back on them, this person agreed their judgment of me was unfair.

The majority of people in the world today will make decisions which could be detrimental to good health, this doesn't mean they deserve a chronic disease. What it does mean is we are all responsible for poor lifestyle decisions and need to be aware of this and limit those poor decisions.

4. You Need to Get Up and Stop Feeling Sorry for Yourself.

A few years ago, I had a lady contact me quite distressed about the attitude of her daughter.

Her daughter would come and visit her and couldn't understand why her mother couldn't do the things she used to. The daughter never actually bothered to learn about her mother's disease and judged her mother on what she saw when visiting.

The daughter felt her mother was just feeling sorry for herself. This woman felt pressured by her daughter to do things which she wasn't up to.

On one occasion the woman decided to give in to her daughter and go to the local shops, even though she was feeling very breathless.

"This is why you are so breathless – you don't get out enough." The daughter said this to her.

A few days later the woman was admitted to hospital with a nasty exacerbation. Most patients can determine whether they are up to doing an activity or not. The woman's daughter put so much pressure on her to go out with her and put her at risk.

Understanding a patient's disease is important. Too many times people ask questions without thinking about the implications of what they are saying. Many COPD patients are happy to discuss and receive advice about how to better their quality of life.

What they don't want or need are negativity and judgment.