You look good

Among the community of people with chronic illnesses, a common topic of contention is the grey area of receiving a compliment – a particular compliment, that is. The compliment in question? “You look good.”

It seems harmless. It is a mostly well intentioned statement, offered up as a token gesture of good will and care. However, it can also be given to those who are unwell long-term as a “well, you look fine, so what is the problem?” statement.

Don’t get me wrong; we understand that there is a time to enjoy this compliment, such as when you are wearing a great outfit, or have done your hair nicely. This is even more appreciated knowing the huge amount of will-power and energy, and possibly pain and sickness, that it took for a lot of people to do that. The problem people have with this compliment, when they are chronically unwell, is that in certain situations, it raises feelings of being doubted, and accused, and results in guilt for looking “good” when unwell, sadness and anger for being questioned, frustration that all the hard work it has taken to look good has been overlooked in one simple swoop, and confusion of how one should look when unwell. Looking “good” can often occur simultaneously with feeling horrendous, and that is the issue.

When you are unwell, day in and day out, looking good is not that important, and feels even more superficial and self-absorbed than it did when you were well. It is also hard to believe the compliment because when you are unwell constantly, you feel that you couldn’t possibly look good!

Looking good is useful at times, because you can try your best to pretend that all is going well, and that you are the same as everyone else. Ultimately, that means that you don’t have to explain yourself if you choose not to. However, there are

not many other advantages of having an illness which is invisible. For example, as a reasonably young looking person, I often feel worried about taking a seat in a situation where they may be limited. I look “good”, so why should I take a seat from someone who “looks” more needy of it, such as an elderly person, or someone with a baby. However, if I stand too long, it is possible for me to take a spectacular crash towards the ground! But, without making a big song and dance about it, how do I take a seat without the judgemental glares that can accompany it?

Another situation when looking “good” is difficult is when my mum will be carrying multiple shopping bags, making several trips to and from the car, for example, while I look like a self-absorbed, lazy person, carrying one light bag and then sitting down!

At the moment, I am striving to not let my illness beat me. If I want to do something, I try my best to do it, or adapt it, or deal with feeling bad afterwards (and usually during!). I don’t want to miss out on things out of a fear that onlookers won’t understand how I am doing it if I am unwell. I recently attended two friends’ weddings. They were such exciting and freeing experiences when I am often at home on the couch. I paced myself, and was even rewarded with the ability to have a dance! This was huge for me. I absolutely understand that for someone on the outside, seeing me dance, or seeing a photo of me dressed up, would see conflicting information when I am too unwell to work, or live independently. The thing is, even when I look “good”, I may be hiding a multitude of symptoms which I am pushing aside to enjoy an opportunity of fun, and may pay for it for days, or weeks after.

Looking good means it is difficult for people (even medically trained people), to understand the situation of those with

invisible illness. It is also easy, even for the most caring and supportive person, to forget or overlook the struggle. And as a chronically unwell person, trust me, you do not like having to constantly make reference to your limitations to remind people!

It is a tough line to attempt to navigate, I think we can all agree. Perhaps the best way is for everyone to be supportive of each other, throw out the judgement, and when it comes to invisible illness, learn that happiness and fulfilment are by far more important than how we look.