

Andrea Kenney

Living smart with allergies and asthma GARY BUTLER

Toronto writer Andrea Kenney is a lifelong “double sufferer,” coping with both respiratory allergies and asthma. As a child, she missed about 10 weeks of school per year, rarely participated in gym classes and much of the time couldn’t ride her own bike. Now in her 40s, she recently made the decision to work only at home, limiting her outside time to essential errands and appointments, and the occasional leisure excursion. That said, Andrea refuses to be “the girl in the plastic bubble.” She shared with us her “breath-taken” history, her advice for allergy sufferers and her plans for breathing easier in the future.

Was working from home your doctor’s idea?

No doctor ever prescribed home-schooling or working from home. Yet allergic asthma is all about triggers and risk-managing exposure to them. Doctors advise trigger avoidance, but I’m exposed to triggers throughout the 10 to 12 hours per day that most people spend outside of the home. When those triggers are delivered by breathing, that’s a lot of exposure! By spending most of my time indoors, I now control my exposure. At any job where I work on-site, I lose that control.

What led you to make such a big change?

I got to a point of utter physical and spiritual exhaustion from working sick. Add 15 years of serious medical complications (including major depression), plus the side effects of the oral steroid prednisone, and I knew I had to stop living the way I had been. By reducing outdoor time to two to four hours a few days a week, I estimate that I’ve cut my exposure to allergens and colds by about 75%. That’s translated into being off of oral steroids for four years now, versus taking them four to eight times per year in order to live like a person without allergies. And my breathing is completely normal most of the time.

Has your life ever been on the line?

When I was 19, my boyfriend at the time adopted a kitten. Within two months, I nearly died from the constant exposure to cat dander on his clothes. A lobe of my lung collapsed, and my lungs filled with mucus. Another time, on a bus, I had a life-threatening allergic reaction to, ironically, an allergy shot. I survived that without epinephrine, probably because I grew up with so many severe asthma attacks with no hospital visits.

Would you say you have a very pragmatic attitude?

Finding solutions, one little piece at a time, for illness-generated problems is a fact of life for people living with chronic disease. I thank my lucky stars that I don’t have food allergies, because some have the full spectrum — respiratory allergies, asthma and food anaphylaxis. I’m also grateful that working from home is an option. That being said, finding work hasn’t been easy. Even my local Service Canada employment agency, which has a mandate to help people with disabilities find work, has not established networks of employers that accommodate those who need to work from home.

What is your day-to-day approach to living?

I remain focused on my quality of life.

We’ve all got too much living to do to live it unnecessarily sick. In order to have the least downtime possible, we need to take responsibility for whatever part of our illnesses

we can minimize. But chronic illness can breed self-doubt because our society values productivity so highly. If an individual fails in the productivity loop, a negative message is generated from the outside world, which can insidiously turn into a sort of psychological baseball bat with which to hit yourself. That bat contributes nothing to your quality of life, so I don’t play with it anymore! 🦇

