

Rest Between Sets

Last Name: Ellis First Name: Emily Age: 16

Symptom(s): Lower back pain

Other comments: N/A

A two-week fever plus two months recovery equals collapsing on your bedroom floor while trying to make the bed you've lived in for too long. What? That doesn't add up. Let me review it again: *A two-week fever plus two months recovery equals your spine forgetting just for a moment how to support your body. Your knees hit the floor with a THUD, and it feels like a vacuum just sucked all the air out of your lungs. You are in too much shock to truly experience the pain. You reach up, grasping for support or answers or both. One hand clings to the corner of the nightstand, the other comes up empty.* Wow, that sounds even worse.

"It was the stress," my mom said. "Five finals, three drama performances, and one year of high school done. You pushed yourself too hard. Your body couldn't handle it."

"It was the illness," my new chiropractor said (I had not needed a chiropractor before this). "Two weeks of fatigue, fever, and coughing made you weak. You pushed yourself too hard. Your body couldn't handle it."

I missed the last two weeks of my freshman year of high school. That was too hard. I missed saying goodbye to my friends. That was too hard. Tucking in the corner of my bedsheets was too hard. Getting up off the floor was too hard.

“A candle burning at both ends.” That’s what my science teacher called me. I hadn’t heard this phrase before. “It means you’re working too much,” she explained. “The more you work, the faster you’ll burn out.”

Rest. That word haunts me. I know it’s necessary—even God rested on the seventh day. But *rest* has become synonymous with *lazy* in my mind.

The chiropractor did more for my mental health than my physical. “So, you say you’re bullied in school, and you’re involved in practically every club, and you play *how many* musical instruments? My guess is, you’ve immensely stressed your body out.” She cracked my back with a *POP*. “I was picked on in high school too. Worst years of my life. I’ll never go to a reunion.” *POP*. “Jesus, you have the tightest hamstrings I’ve ever seen!” *POP*. “Okay, darling, you just ice your back, stretch out those hamstrings, and *rest* and you’ll be just fine.”

Ice is nice, hot is not. Ice is nice, hot is not. My chiropractor’s motto echoes in my head as I take two bags of off-brand frozen peas out of the kitchen freezer. I crunch them in my hands, breaking up the lumps and watching little bits of ice fall from the packaging to the floor. I hate these peas.

I sit on the living room couch and put the frozen bags behind my back. It’s uncomfortable. This isn’t right. Is this how normal people sit? Is my posture correct?

Am I “*resting*?”

After the pain is numbed away and I can feel the clumps of peas falling apart inside the bags, I return them to the freezer, shutting them away in the dark until I need them again in a few hours.

Four years later, those peas are still in the freezer.

Last Name: Ellis First Name: Emily Age: 18

Symptom(s): Lower back pain, tight muscles, fatigue

Other comments: Symptoms were probably caused by a weightlifting injury

1...2...3...

The gym fan whirs in the corner as I continue my set, sweat beading on my forehead. I take a deep breath in as I squat down, dumbbell in hands, and breathe out when I stand back up.

65 pounds is my new Personal Record. 65 pounds was 60 last week, and 55 the week prior. 65 pounds is half my body weight, and I can deadlift it. *I'm recovered. My body can handle it. I'm not pushing myself too hard. I am strong.* That's what I'd like to tell myself every time I'd lift, despite the increasing pain in my back.

17...18...19...

I needed 20 reps to complete my set. At 5, I felt great. At 10, I slowed down. At 15, I should have stopped.

At 20, I collapsed.

"You pushed yourself too hard. Your body couldn't handle it," one friend said while shoveling ice cubes into a plastic bag.

"Maybe we should get you one of those Life Alert things, for the next time you fall and can't get up," said another as she searched for medical tape.

“Easy does it, Grandma.” A third friend held the bag of ice to my lower back as she walked around me, wrapping tape around my waist and the bag before pulling my shirt down to cover it.

Every time my back gave out, they would help me wrap myself in medical tape, strapping a bag of ice to my back. At the end of each day, I’d pour a bag of lukewarm water down the drain, knowing full well I’d do it all again tomorrow.

“Between your back and your shin splints, you’re a mess,” my high school’s athletic trainer told me as he adjusted the heating pad on my back. “You’re a beast when it comes to lifting, but you need to slow down. You push yourself too hard. Your body can’t handle it.”

“I know, I know,” I grumbled into the treatment table.

“Not reaching a PR doesn’t mean it’s the end of the world.” He took the heating pad off my back and handed me a muscle roller. “Now take the Torture Stick and roll out your shins during basketball warmups.”

I could hear the other girls in the gym, dribbling basketballs up and down the court, without me and my injuries.

“You know how I feel about rolling out,” I complained, but took the roller anyway. I grimaced and blinked back tears as the ridges on the roller dug into my skin.

“No pain, no gain,” my trainer said. I nodded in agreement.

Last Name: Ellis First Name: Emily Age: 20

Symptom(s): Lower back pain, tight muscles, fatigue, restlessness, aches and pains, numbing and tingling, headaches and migraines

Other comments: I want to be strong again and I will do whatever it takes to get there.

The spine of a twenty-year-old should not be tearing itself apart. Each vertebra in my back should not be pushing and shoving the others, fighting for my attention.

“Your X-rays show that your real problem is actually in your neck, not your back.” My chiropractor put the first image on the projector. I expected to see breakage, tears, *something*. There were my skull, neck, and shoulders, displayed in black-and-white film, right in front of me. *Everything looks fine to me*. “Your neck has lost its natural curve and is abnormally straight.” *Aren’t necks supposed to be straight?* She switched the picture to an image of the vertebrae in my lower back. “Your back is curving, over-correcting, trying to support the weight that your neck no longer can.”

When my chiropractor showed me the X-rays, I couldn’t help but be fascinated by them. Isn’t the human body a beautiful thing? If one portion of your body starts falling apart, the rest of your body retaliates. Your body would rather cause further injury to correct the first problem than to let a single part of you suffer alone. The same body that pushes me to lift heavier is also fighting battles I don’t even know about. I may spend every day moving my body without even knowing how my body is actually *moving me*.

“This problem shouldn’t happen for someone your age.” My chiropractor pointed out vertebrae at the bottom of my spine. “These are rubbing, grinding against each other.” The vertebrae looked like they had just been attacked by a slap-happy toddler with a fingernail file.

“And these,” she pointed to my middle back, “these are also out of alignment. If this continues, it could cause serious problems down the road.”

Her definition of serious seemed to be very different from mine. What’s more serious than being in pain every time I sit, stand, or sleep? More serious than not being able to comfortably drive a car for extended periods of time? More serious than occasionally not even being able to walk?

More serious than always being afraid of falling?

“The way it is right now, we might have just discovered what’s causing all your other problems.” The chiropractor turned off the projector and pointed at a diagram of the human nervous system on the wall. “The nerves connected to these problem places in your spine could be causing all your other symptoms, especially your headaches and fatigue.” *Is she telling me I’m restless because my neck is too straight?* “We’ll get you set up in our system right away so we can create a plan to get you back on track.”

“Maybe your backpack is just too heavy?” my mom said as we drove home from the chiropractor. “Or maybe it’s because you never sit up straight?” I slouch even lower in the passenger seat with a huff. “If you stretched more, you might not have this problem.”

“I don’t think all the stretching in the world can save my lower back, Mom.”

The chiropractor recommended I do more core work. A stronger core can help support the back. The only problem with that was that every core exercise known to man made me feel like I could collapse at any moment. Crunches curved my back too much. Mountain Climbers would make me push myself too hard. I could do planks...but no one ever wants to do planks.

“Maybe I didn’t do enough. Maybe I need to work harder. My body can handle it. I’ve made it this far after all.”

“Lifting won’t help you,” my mom snapped. We were silent the rest of the way home.

Last Name: Ellis First Name: Emily Age: 21

Symptom(s): (see previous note)

Other comments: Will continue lifting with caution

I step into the gym with a sigh. It’s 7:30 in the morning, and my brain is screaming, *Why now? Why are you awake?* My leggings are too tight, my tennis shoes too old, my muscles too sore. The spreadsheet I use to track my lifts is too blank and has been for far too long.

The treadmills sit motionless, the large rotating fan hums to itself, filling the empty space with white noise, and the 50-, 60-, and 70-pound dumbbells gather dust on the rack.

I am alone here, in the small, outdated gym in my university residence hall.

My water bottle clinks as I set it on the floor along with my weightlifting sheet and a resistance band. I pull my hair up into a ponytail and walk over to the weigh rack. I’m tempted to grab a 50-pound dumbbell. I used to be able to lift that much, but I’d like to think I’ve learned my lesson when I settle on a 20-pound instead.

After I finish my set, I record it on my sheet. *Sumo deadlifts, 20 lbs., 20 reps.*

I’m afraid, though I’ll never admit it. Being alone in a gym plus my streak with back pain equals more fears than I can handle. Fear that I’ll never get back to the strength I once had. Fear

that I'll one day have to give up weightlifting, or else risk permanent injury to my back. Fear of failure, fear of weakness, fear of pain.

I return the 20 to the rack and pick a set of 8s off the floor, careful to bend over in such a way as to not irritate my back. I sit on a bench and raise the weights over my head in steady, even motions, just like I've done so many times before. *Overhead shoulder presses*. Even though I still use 8s, the lift has gotten easier. *I am stronger*. This time, I'm not just telling myself that.

My back pain has felt like my thorn in the flesh, my Achilles heel, my self-destruct button. One wrong move, and it's game over. My physical strength is a balancing scale, just waiting to tip to one side or the other. On the one side, I am strong: I lift correctly and regularly, I eat well, my life is in order (or so it seems). On the other side, I am weak: my back gives out, I can't work out, I lose my discipline, my life falls apart.

At the end of my workout, I snap a quick picture in the gym mirror, capturing a lopsided grin and frizzy hair. If I don't track my progress, I'll forget how far I've come. I return a set of 15-pound weights to the weight rack and sanitize the bench I was using before recording my last set for the day—*bicep curls, 15 lbs., 20 reps*. The Icy Hot on my back starts to burn when the sweat hits it. It'll leave a sunburnt-red mark on my skin for a while, I realize as I leave the gym by myself.