



Margarida



On vacation



With my daughter, Mariana



**Margarida Espanha
Portugal**

My name is Margarida, I am 51 years old and I am from Lisbon. I consider myself to be a happy person with a wonderful family at my side. I have a lovely daughter, Mariana, 21 years old, a very wise and understanding husband and a loving and caring mother of 89 years old.

I have worked as a university lecturer at the School of Human Movement for the past 29 years and I love teaching. I also conduct research and, together with my fantastic team, I am involved in developing exercise programmes for people with osteoarthritis of the knee to perform in the water and at home. It is great to be involved in something for the common good.

I really like to read, do craft work or take a walk along the seashore. I love the beach and the sea fascinates me.

I received the information about the Stene Prize from our organisation, the Portuguese League Against Rheumatism, and I hope that my personal experiences can help others in the same situation and encourage them not to give up.

Overcoming the challenges of getting around with a musculoskeletal disease

When I was 24 years old, I sustained an injury whilst practising handball, my favourite sport, and this meant that over the course of the next four years my right knee had to be operated on not once, or twice but three times.

The main reason was a lesion on the joint cartilage, which did not heal well. As if that wasn't enough, the medial meniscus also needed to be removed. High-level competition came to an abrupt end and with it my dreams crumbled and I was faced with a seemingly unimaginable challenge. There were months and then years of physical and psychological adaptation. As someone who was seen as a tomboy with a degree in physical education, my days of being able to run, jump and pursue risky activities were over.

Without realising it, in addition to the unconditional support of

friends and family, it was my father's experience that proved fundamental to my recovery. Without doubt he has left an unmistakable mark on the way I deal with life. A transfemoral amputee from a young age, and later stricken by hemiplegia, he made a miraculous recovery thanks to his extraordinary willpower and the constant physical exercise he undertook – and always with a smile on his face.

Premature osteoarthritis (OA) of the knee seemed to be my enemy, but they say you should love your enemies. It seemed impossible for OA to become my friend, but it was the right approach to take. Instead of focusing on what I was no longer able to do, I started appreciating almost everything that my knee still allowed me to do. During my daily routine I would enjoy a long hot shower to relax my muscles and reduce the stiffness, and perform joint mobility exercises. Another priority was the stretching to maintain the articular range of motion, and static contractions of the quadriceps muscles – which are responsible for stabilising and cushioning the knee – in order to combat the atrophy triggered by the pain.

Right now I only have a few limitations at home. Apart from climbing up to reach the highest cupboards, I have got used to being less self-sufficient and more accepting about asking my daughter for help, or simply not being able to perform a task. This does not imply weakness, but rather an awareness that my body's limits have changed. It wasn't always this way! To start with I felt hurt when people didn't realise I needed help.

I know I should spare my knee and that trips to the supermarket with a full shopping trolley are not a good idea. I avoid carrying heavy weights, as the pain soon makes itself felt. The best remedy is to alternate effort with rest, and so when I get home I find the sofa, stretch out my legs and pick up a newspaper or magazine, and take a 'siesta' when the fatigue gets too much. But I am finding ways to deal with this situation, which have already made a difference; my husband either takes my place, or orders the supermarket shopping online each month, thereby saving me having to carry it.

I consider myself to be a quiet person, and my husband is also more of a homebody. When we



With my students



My office

go out to a restaurant with friends, if necessary, I am dropped off by the door on arrival. On the way back, if the car is nearby I can manage a short walk, but otherwise I am picked up once again. When we go on beach holidays my limitations vanish and I feel like a fish in the water, but this year I wasn't able to accompany my husband on strolls along the shore. The disease had intensified to the point that the pain wouldn't leave me.

"When we go on beach holidays my limitations vanish and I feel like a fish in the water..."

I am a teacher at the Faculty of Human Movement Studies, and about two years ago my office was on the ground floor, but then I was forced to move. There were two options for my new office: on the first floor, but with too steep a staircase, or on the third floor in the tower of the old office. I decided to be closer to the sky, but that option meant that I had to reorganise my everyday life, planning the number of ascents and descents I could make each day. I try to take advantage of each descent to carry out several tasks, before going back up again. So when I have to run errands, meet friends or go to a bar, I combine it with lessons that I will have before or after; it's not

two in one, but a ratio of three/four in one. However, my days are not always the same and today my planning failed completely. The place I had to go to closes at midday and it was still too early for lunch. I had to hand in some documents and go up again only to come back down an hour later, and in the afternoon the situation repeated itself. As a result, in addition to pain in the affected knee, I overburdened the other knee, so I haven't left the sofa since dinner. If it gets really bad, 10 minutes of ice relieves the pain in the swollen knee; other times, if the cold is intense, I heat a bag belonging to Gloria, who is also a patient at LPCDR [Portuguese League Against Rheumatic Diseases], which does wonders for joint stiffness. I have also devised strategies for protecting my knee when going up and down stairs, by using it as an opportunity to do functional training, exercising the extensor muscles of the leg. On the way up I ease the burden by holding the bannister with the opposite hand, whereas on the way down my strategy is different: I prolong the weight-bearing on the good limb and only put weight on my bad knee for a second, thus shortening the duration of weight-bearing and avoiding excessive overburdening. This way the pain is silent, or at least hushed.

Knowing that low-impact exercise, muscular strengthening and stretching are essential for treating OA in the knee, I decided to join a gym. I made a deal with myself to prioritise the trips to the gym or the pool two or three

times a week. Since the impact of running is unbearable, I do my warm-up on a stationary bicycle without resistance and use machines that target the lower limbs. The secret is to increase the burden of each exercise with the number of repetitions and minimal weight increments (1 to 2.5 kg). Sometimes people wonder why I use such a low weight, but now I've got used to that. Another method I've adopted is not to leave out a single leg muscle. By strengthening all of them, the stronger ones can take over from the weaker ones around the knee. And the results are apparent!

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How many times have I asked myself, "why me?", blaming the Creator for what happened. But after giving it a lot of thought, I had to ask for forgiveness. After all, it was me who chose to play another year, despite the pain I felt and my mother's warnings. Later, I understood that everything in life has a purpose and that God is good and doesn't make mistakes. The pain that follows me has gone from suffering to a gift. Looking back I understand that this tribulation has changed the way I am: I have become patient, gained experience and with it I hope to be able to help others in a similar situation. My dream is to leave a legacy to those I work with in exercise and health, to develop educational programmes and to try and encourage people to view and treat those with musculoskeletal diseases with respect and compassion, helping them to face their condition.

"The pain that follows me has gone from suffering to a gift."