

## Reflection Assignment: Personal Illness Narrative

**Instructions:** *Read and reflect.*

The goal of this reflection assignment is to make clear that everyone's life circumstances and experiences, however benign or uneventful, have important effects on their views about health, illness, and health care. A means to this goal is promoting reflection on your own experience as a means of heightening your ability to recognize and appreciate how your upbringing and experiences may influence how you view bioethics issues, health care providers, and patients.

The influence of social and cultural factors on how we experience health and illness is both obvious and elusive. Disease is a scientific category but illness is an experience that may or may not correspond with disease. Yet it may be difficult for us to see our understanding of disease and experience of illness as being influenced by family, friends, and the time and place in which we live. We can see the effects of society and culture in others, but it can be difficult to see ourselves as being similarly affected.

The "social and cultural factors affect others but not me" approach can be influential in medicine, because the medical culture can recognize the social and cultural influences felt by patients without also recognizing the influences affecting every physician. It is also surprisingly easy for professionals working in health care settings to be affected by those same influences without realizing it. One way to overcome this difficulty is to think about our own experiences and influences. Use the following questions to guide your own personal consideration and understanding of the experience of illness.

1. When you were growing up, what counted in your family as being sick enough to stay home from school? Who decided that? How were you treated when sick -- did you get privileges, like special foods or extra TV, or were you expected to keep up with all your homework and get well quickly? Who took care of you when you were sick? What counted as being sick enough to go to the doctor? Who decided that?
2. Did your family always do what the doctor ordered? Were any home remedies used in your household? Did you perceive any differences in views about health and health care in your older relatives, such as grandparents?
3. Did you perceive any difference between the way you were expected to behave when sick and how older people in your household, such as your parents, behaved? Did you see any differences based on gender? Based on employment status?
4. As you grew up, were there any changes in your approach to being sick? For instance, in high school, college, and graduate or professional school, what has been "sick enough to stay home" and "sick enough to seek medical care" for you? If there have been changes, what do you think accounts for them?
5. If you have, or have had, a spouse, partner, or significant other, have you seen any differences in the way you and your partner view health and illness? If so, what do you think accounts for them?
6. What health-promoting beliefs and behaviors did you learn as a child? What new beliefs and behaviors have you taken on since you were young? How do you think your school and work schedules have affected your ability to protect and promote your health as you would like to?
7. Finally, some students have had direct experience of illness (your own, a family member's, a friend's) that are more serious than the routine illnesses of childhood. If that is true for you, how has your experience affected your view of health and health care?