

Metaphor and Understandings of Chronic Illness

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In her classic work *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and its Metaphors*, Susan Sontag argues that the metaphors we use to understand illness, in particular the war metaphor, have painful consequences for those who suffer from illness. Suffering results not only (or even primarily) from what disease does to our bodies. Suffering emerges with our understanding of what it means to be ill. To address this, Sontag argued that disease should be stripped of metaphor so that it can be experienced in some less culturally embedded and coded way. We feel that the problem isn't metaphorical understanding per se. There isn't any other kind of understanding. All meaning is metaphorical. The problem, then, is the limitations that exist in the variety of culturally sanctioned metaphors used to understand illness. In this paper we draw on oral history interviews conducted with adults living with cystic fibrosis to a call for more, rather than fewer, metaphors. While we urge caution in the ways in which metaphors are employed (and against whom they are targeted), we call for an increase in the variety of metaphors available to those who are ill.