

My name is Veselka Šoštarić, I live in Croatia, and I have epilepsy. After a grand mal seizure, I was diagnosed at 14 years old in the middle of the first grade of high school. The cause was and still is unknown. My environment was not well educated, and I did not find understanding. It is still a common misconception that epilepsy is a mental illness. There was a lot of prejudice and stigmatization. The period of medication adjustment did not go well. Despite excellent doctors and the support of psychologists, depression occurred in combination with the side effects of medication. Getting such a diagnosis at puberty is not easy. I read about the experiences of others, but it didn't help much because many weren't positive. I have decided that I will not allow epilepsy to mark and control my life. If I do not see a bright future, I will create it myself.

I am now 32 years old, married and have three beautiful, intelligent and completely healthy children: a daughter and two sons. There are a lot of fears when starting a family when you are diagnosed with epilepsy. But in collaboration with a neurologist, I adjusted my medication during the family planning period, and with the help of a doctor, gave birth without significant problems. The pregnancies were high risk, but I was convinced that I could do that. There are many sleepless nights, which is not the safest option for people with epilepsy, and without adequate support, I would not be able to go through it on my own without consequences. My husband was and remains the biggest support in my life, and without him, I would not have succeeded. With regular therapy, the seizures have entirely receded. Although I have to take antiepileptic drugs for the rest of my life, I can fully care for my family without any problems. In Croatia, many are ashamed of their diagnosis of epilepsy. I will not lie; people often feel sorry for us. We often think that we will not be able to achieve everything we planned before the diagnosis. So I decided to speak out publicly and prove otherwise. Encourage women with a diagnosis of epilepsy who are afraid to have a family due to poor education, or the environment tells them that they cannot. The Croatian Association for Epilepsy contacted me on few days before International Epilepsy Day and asked me to make a video. In the video, I addressed young people who are just facing a diagnosis because I wish I had such positive stories when I was diagnosed and fell into depression. I wanted to convey to them a positive attitude and hope for a bright future. The video had a significant impact, so I was asked to tell my story to a journalist from a portal, and it was published on the occasion of Epilepsy Day. Among the many bad experiences and stories about the period of adjustment to diagnosis and medication, I wanted to leave a positive story to show young people that life ahead of them is full of opportunities despite the diagnosis.

Now that I have achieved as a mother and wife, I am also studying to achieve my goals in the business field. In the future, I plan to support people in Croatia to talk about their diagnosis without shame, educate the environment, remove the stigma. People with epilepsy are valuable members of society, and it is crucial that we are accepted and supported.