

A PASSION FOR SEWING

The setbacks and success stories of being a disabled sewist from those in the know

Written by Rachel Avery

Right: Marie Lawlor blogs about living and stitching with chronic illness at Marie Stitched Up.



Sitting down to craft, with the prospect of making something completely from scratch, can be a daunting task. But how about also being faced with the issue of adapting the pattern to accommodate your disability, changing your equipment to ease the process or scheduling in breaks to prevent exhaustion? People who are less able, due to a disability or illness, face many of these types of issues when it comes to their passion for sewing. But instead of being stumped in the face of adversity, here are the people championing accessibility.



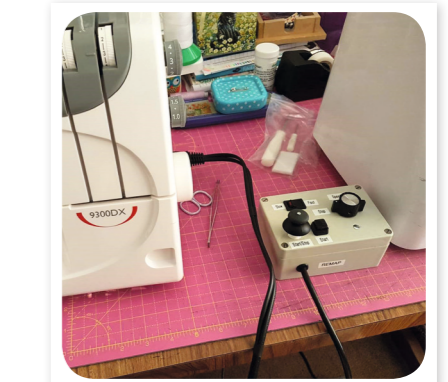
Left: Andie Wells set up Chronically Sewn in 2018 as a place for sewists to share inspiration as well as somewhere to discuss sewing issues that arise with chronic mental and physical illnesses. Andie also runs a blog at www.sewprettyinpink.com.

Although it's tempting for Marie to sew until she drops, there are some benefits to tackling projects in bite-size pieces: "Enjoying the process instead of rushing to the end has helped me enjoy my sewing time no end. By doing this, the eventual garment is generally higher quality and therefore it is a more sustainable way to make which is important to me." Managing to see the positives despite the struggles is a skill disabled crafters seem to have in abundance.

ESSENTIAL EQUIPMENT

Improvisation is a keyword when it comes to being a crafter who is less able. Many sewists have found clever hacks and savvy solutions in order to work around their restrictions. Chronically ill sewist, Andie Wells (@sewprettyinpink), who runs an Instagram feed for other disabled/ill crafters (@chronicallysewn), demonstrates that when there's a will there's a way: "My joints are hypermobile so I have trouble gripping with my fingers since they bend backwards. In projects where I have to grip elastic and pull it, I have a lot of trouble, so I use surgical clamps to grip the elastic."

Sometimes solutions cannot be achieved as easily as this, and equipment needs to be modified on a bigger scale. After searching and searching for an overlocker with a hand control instead of a foot peddle, Michelle Mason turned to the charity, Remap (www.remap.org.uk). They are pioneering the way when it comes to giving less able people the same opportunities by providing modified equipment. And one of their many areas of expertise is adjusting various



Above: Following a consultation with disabled crafter Michelle Mason, charity Remap created an adapted overlocker with a hand control instead of a foot pedal so Michelle can achieve professional seams comfortably.

CHANGING PATTERNS AND PROCESSES

Even when it comes to the seemingly simple task of selecting which pattern to make, disabled sewists face a challenge. Sewing hobbyist and wheelchair user Michelle Mason (@michebemason) is keen to point out that generic sewing patterns aren't a one-size-fits-all thing: "It would be amazing if sewing patterns were made with wheelchair users in mind. We have different needs in our clothes, but not many designers notice we exist." She adds, "It would be good to see what clothes look like when you're sitting down. I'm usually in a powerchair or mobility scooter – clothes look different when sitting to standing."

Stay-at-home mum, sewing-enthusiast and blogger, Marie Lawlor (www.marie-stitchedup.com) agrees with Michelle: "There are certain things you do need to consider when choosing which garments to wear as a wheelchair user... I love massive sleeves, but they will be caked in mud in

two minutes." For garments that need to be stylish, comfortable, and practical to wear in a wheelchair, having the ability to be able to make her own clothes is a liberating skill for Marie: "The beauty of being the creator of my own clothes means I don't have to compromise on styles I love as I can adapt the pattern." Marie lives with a chronic illness which means she copes with a range

of debilitating symptoms like extreme fatigue on a daily basis. As well as adapting the clothes she makes, Marie has to carefully consider how and when she sews.

"Many of us with chronic conditions have been told by healthcare professionals to introduce pacing into our lives," reveals Marie – which essentially means altering the way she would normally approach a sewing project. "It is a simple fact that without breaking up my tasks, I could not sew a complete garment without causing myself an abundance of pain and fatigue."

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Above: Sewing is a hugely important part of Michelle Mason's life, and her adapted overlocker from Remap means she can carry on developing her skills.

sewing tools and machines for disabled people to use. "They took their time to help me and it showed me that kindness still exists in this world and made me a very happy sewist," Michelle remembers fondly.

Remap's CEO David Martin explains: "We provide solutions to everyday problems when there is nothing commercially available, designing and custom-making equipment for individuals because everyone's needs are different." These bespoke solutions of course cost money to achieve, however, the benefactors themselves do not have to pay a penny: "Our skilled volunteers respond to thousands of requests for our help every year and we provide our service free of charge," reports David.

A VISIBLE COMMUNITY

As this charity work and Michelle's heartwarming story demonstrate, there are some amazing things happening for disabled crafters behind the scenes – but what about in the public eye? Andie Wells is just one of the people striving to make disabled people

more visible. Inspired to launch the Instagram account @chronicallysewn because of a lack of representation, Andie didn't wait for someone else to act, but instead "connected with several other sewists who identified as disabled or chronically ill" and built that community. Andie urges companies to "include disabled people in imagery," but warns to not "use them as tokens."

Stephanie Thomas is a Disability Fashion Stylist (www.cur8able.com) and dedicates her time to dressing disabled people, providing design consultancy, and speaking out on the world stage about fashion and disability. For her, the industry must do three things: "Acknowledge that people with disabilities are viable fashion consumers, listen to fashion customers with disabilities, and serve disabled fashion customers without pitying them or patronising them." Stephanie champions the use of the term "adaptive fashion" to describe clothing designed with disability in mind, but admits that there's still a long way to go in the "quest for fashion inclusivity."

SEW SOCIAL

Being restricted to the confines of their own home is a reality for some disabled people, and for them, the Internet provides a lifeline. "I am often unable to leave the house due to fatigue or pain, so social media is an important way for me, and other disabled people, to connect with others," explains

Anna Colwill (@crippleknits). "That's why we (Anna and Eve Walker – @eve_and_the_woofers) formed DisabledMakers, because the disabled community online has been such a huge

support for us. To see one's experiences represented, and to know that you are not alone, is so important." Anna Colwill is a co-founder of the platform DisabledMakers (@disabledmakers) and the Instagram feed highlights everything the brand stands for – inclusivity and celebration of amazing, crafty people. Andie Wells agrees with Anna in regards to the positive impact of the online world: "People often go on about the toxicity of social media, but that perspective is often from a place of privilege, since for

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Photo: Benjo Arwas

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MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

The creative art of sewing is a rewarding pastime for a myriad of different reasons. There's the feeling of accomplishment, the joy of having a creative outlet and the welcomed sanctuary of having some downtime to de-stress. But for some people it is so much more than that. It is the skill that brightens their darkest days and allows them to feel totally free. Physical ailments and illnesses often bring with them a range of mental health stresses too, and the outlet of sewing has even been referred to as a form of therapy. "Sewing has given me a purpose for life" asserts Michelle Mason. "It makes me

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Above: Stephanie Thomas, a Disability Fashion Stylist fighting for equality in the fashion world. Top right: Anna Colwill and Eve Walker (bottom right) are co-founders of DisabledMakers.

feel useful and productive and making things helps with my anxiety and depression." Marie Lawlor also uses sewing as a positive force in

her life: "I started out sewing as a therapeutic outlet from life with a chronic condition." Despite the struggles that disabled sewists face, their determination to pursue this creative path is astounding, and the communities available to all are a tremendous source of support. The power of needle and thread makes us all able to achieve something wonderful, and these inspirational people are testament to that.

INSPIRATIONAL MESSAGES FROM INSPIRATIONAL SEWISTS

Invaluable advice and reassurance from sewists who carry on in the face of adversity.

"Fabric can be replaced if things go wrong, just give it a go."
Michelle Mason

"If you lose your sewjo, sometimes a little absence does indeed make the heart grow fonder and you will come back to it refreshed and inspired."
Marie Lawlor

"My advice is to not push yourself to complete projects at someone else's pace."
Andie Wells

"Don't compare your progress to others. You don't have to do things the 'proper' way if it doesn't feel right, sewing is all about doing what works for you."
Anna Colwill

