



THALASSEMIA PROFILE

Maria Hadjidemetriou



“Fall in love with thalassemia because it is a part of who you are.”

This is Maria Hadjidemetriou’s advice for people living with thalassemia, an inherited blood disorder. She has lived with thalassemia all of her life. Thalassemia is a condition in which red blood cells are unable to make enough of a protein called hemoglobin, which is responsible for carrying oxygen throughout the body. Maria, and people like her who have a severe form of the disorder, manage it by getting regular blood transfusions. They also take chelator, which is a medicine that gets rid of extra iron that can build up in the blood and organs due to frequent blood transfusions.

Why does Maria encourage a person with thalassemia to fall in love with the disorder? *“Because if you want people to love you, you first have to love yourself. If thalassemia is part of you, that means loving it as well. Once you do that, things start working for you rather than against you.”*

Maria credits her parents for teaching her to be very strong so she can meet the challenges of living with thalassemia. When she was nine years old, doctors removed her spleen because of thalassemia complications. As a result, Maria experienced a weaker body and immune system and high fevers. On one occasion, her mother placed Maria in a bathtub of ice to help lower her high fever. When Maria complained, her mother was sympathetic but also knew this was an important moment. *“Look at me,”* she told Maria. *“There is no cure for thalassemia. You are going to have to live with it the rest of your life—and so you must choose how you will live with it.”* At around the same age, Maria learned to stick a needle under the skin on her abdomen to pump medicine in her body for ten hours every night to remove excess iron in her body. Her father also repeatedly told her that she had to be responsible for this treatment and have respect for thalassemia.

“At age nine, I chose to not let thalassemia defeat me and to live a happy life,” Maria says. “And I have always tried to take responsibility and respect to the next level in managing my health care.”

Maria has been a strong source of support for the thalassemia community in the United States and abroad. Maria went to her first international thalassemia conference in the mid-1990s. She



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strives to bring attention to thalassemia needs, such as knowledge of blood safety, access to the best care, and new options for removing excess iron. *“And I want people with thalassemia all over the world to succeed in their professional and personal lives and to know that they are strong and beautiful.”*

About nine years ago, Maria became a mother. *“Learning I was going to give birth, I began to embrace the motto ‘live slowly.’ Every second of life it is a blessing to be Julia’s mother, so living slowly means I take care to enjoy these moments.”*

Maria receives excellent care from thalassemia providers and she proactively manages her overall health and diet with the help of a nutritionist. She eats healthy, exercises regularly, and meditates every day.

“We each have a responsibility to keep our body and mind strong,” she says. “I urge people with thalassemia to delve into personal development, because the mind is the greatest tool.”

“I hope that people will realize that loving themselves and their thalassemia will help them rise with the tide and give them the strength to take on any waves that threaten to drown them.”

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