



Visual Talk: Making invisible disabilities visible

*Design by Julia Stoevelaar
Text by Pieter Desmet*

Imagine this: you are bursting with energy, ready to start each day with enthusiasm.

But that was last year... Now everything is different. You feel constantly exhausted. Not just tired but as if your body is made of thick syrup. You drag yourself along, not knowing what to do with yourself. Every activity feels like climbing a mountain—even the fun things. It's as if you're carrying a heavy sandbag with you. What's going on here?

This is the daily reality for many people with Long Covid, sometimes years after the virus has gone. Designer Julia Stoevelaar knows this struggle all too well. Living with Long Covid she found it very challenging to explain her situation to those around her. Out of frustration, she decided to turn her experiences into drawings. These drawings turned out to be surprisingly effective. They are now available to everyone as Visual Talk (Beeldpraat in Dutch): a set of 73 cards that make invisible ailments visible.

Invisible limitations

The effects of Long Covid are often invisible to others, despite the enormous impact on your well-being and functioning. How do you explain that you are always exhausted when you look healthy? The constant fatigue and headaches are hard to put into words. And if you don't have the words to explain how you feel, it can lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Additionally, friends, family, and colleagues often don't know how best to support you because they can't see what you're going through. Julia often had images of how she felt. Sometimes it was as if she had a fishbowl over her head, making conversations difficult because the words of the other person didn't really reach her. Other times it felt like her head was in a cloud; a thick mist that smothered her thoughts. She decided to draw these images: a visual language to show how she feels. The visual metaphors work very well to better understand and communicate the feelings of an invisible limitation.



An experience depicted (photo Ludo de Goeje).

Visual Talk: A visual language for not-visible complaints

Because the drawings were so effective, Julia made them available in the form of a card set. Visual Talk consists of 73 cards, each with a drawing and a short description. Think of complaints such as headaches, fatigue, tinnitus, or overstimulation. The beauty of Visual Talk is that it can be used by anyone dealing with invisible limitations, directly or indirectly. Moreover, Julia has added drawings to make them more widely applicable than just for complaints related to Long Covid. Think of burnout, rehabilitation after oncological treatments, asthma, autism, and Lyme disease. In this process, she discovered that despite the diversity of conditions, the experiences of invisible complaints are remarkably universal. The card set is divided into five categories:

- o **Head:** Headaches, concentration problems, and brain fog are different for everyone. The drawings help to capture and explain the nuances in these experiences.
- o **Senses:** Complaints related to hearing, sight, balance, or touch are clearly depicted.
- o **Energy and balance:** Chronic fatigue can be hard to articulate. The cards offer a visual representation of this exhaustion.
- o **Other physical complaints:** Physical complaints, like shortness of breath or heart palpitations, are hard to imagine if you don't experience them yourself.
- o **Feelings and emotions:** Chronic illness or invisible limitations can be mentally challenging. The cards serve as a conversation starter to make the emotional impact discussable.



Twelve examples of Visual Talk cards.

Visual Talk for professionals

Visual Talk not only helps people with complaints but also their caregivers and loved ones. The cards are now widely used by professionals such as occupational therapists, rehabilitation doctors, physiotherapists, and coaches. They use the cards to map out what is going on together with their clients. The cards can help in three ways:

1. Understanding and Recognition: The Visual Talk cards clarify difficult-to-understand complaints. These insights form the basis for actions towards acceptance and recovery actions. An occupational therapist who uses the card set noted that it helps her clients recognize complaints they previously ignored or dismissed as exaggeration. This creates more space to really address the total picture of complaints.

2. Acknowledgment and Support: Maybe you experience a lack of understanding from your environment or have difficulty explaining your situation. The cards help you express your feelings so that others understand better and can support you better. A reintegration coach noted that a client experienced a complaint she only realized others might have through Visual Talk: smelling burning. Another client was pleased to see that she had already left several complaints behind.

3. Conversation in Practice: Visual Talk offers a structured way to discuss complaints. The cards help to initiate and maintain the conversation. Parents noted that their 8-year-old son could explain with the cards why participating in gym class was not working for him. He couldn't find the right words himself and was very happy he could show it with the cards.



Visual Talk – a set of 73 cards (photo Ludo de Goeje).

The power of images

Images can be transformative. I think of “The Blue Marble”—the iconic 1972 photo taken by the Apollo 17 crew on their way to the moon, showing our planet in all its glory. It highlighted its beauty and vulnerability, giving a boost to the environmental movement. It inspired people worldwide to think about sustainability. Just like The Blue Marble, Visual Talk makes something essential visible. The strength lies in the simplicity of the drawings—they capture the essence without complicated words or medical terms.

In a world where we are increasingly connected but sometimes less aware of what the other is going through, Visual Conversations offers a bridge to empathy and understanding. I find it a beautiful example of how personal challenges can lead to solutions that improve the lives of many. It is inspiring to see how a simple, thoughtful design can have profound impacts and reminds us that the smallest tools can sometimes make the biggest differences.



The Blue Marble (1972)



Photo Ludo de Goeje

Visual Talk (Beeldpraat) is an initiative by **Julia Stoevelaar**. She developed the card set with the support of her network, including the Dutch C-support foundation (Covid-19 aftercare). In collaboration with Ilse Daamen of Flora Ergotherapy, she brought Visual Conversations to the market. The card set is available for 25 euros. For more information, see: <https://beeldpraat.net/>

Colophon

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Reference

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