



Chronic Pain

Written by Stephen & Therese Abraham



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The year was 2003. I had a successful career as a Pastor in a progressive modern church that was going places, and I was also a high school chaplain to a vibrant new school. I was respected and known in the community. My life was going places; I had aspirations for the future, a happy family, and dreams of where I thought my life and career would take me. Then there was the incident. Two days before Christmas eve, I went to an after-hours staff gathering where we played paintball skirmish. It was quite physically demanding. As I drove home something didn't feel right. That night there was this incredible pain down my left leg and in my hip and glute. I got ready for the Christmas Eve services as best I could and took every type of pain medication we had in the house and by a miracle made it through the Christmas Eve Service. The very next day (Christmas day), I was in the hospital emergency ward screaming in pain.

From that moment on my life would change forever. I had ruptured a disc in my back with scar tissue constricting the nerve running down my left leg. Pain now became my daily experience. It felt like my leg was being crushed – like a truck had parked on it. Other times it felt like my leg was on fire. I had entered the world of chronic persistent pain.

I fought it as best I could. I went to specialist after specialist, hospital after hospital, waiting room after waiting room seeing every medical professional I could to try and end my suffering so I could regain my life. I had surgery, implants, chiro, physio, was prayed over, and tried every possible medical and natural treatment – all to no avail. My employers kept me on at work for as long as they could, and for a few years I worked on in diminishing capacity while only getting one or two hours sleep a night at the most. With my whole life crumbling around me, I eventually had a complete physical and emotional breakdown and stopped work.

My journey in living with chronic pain had begun.

What is chronic pain?

The simplest definition is simply 'pain that won't go away'.

Medical professionals divide pain into two main categories 'acute pain' and 'chronic pain'. Acute pain is 'every day' pain. It might hurt a little or a lot but it is temporary; it doesn't last very long – anything from a few seconds to a few hours, maybe a day or at most a week. Most severe acute pain is treatable with medication and resolves over time.

Chronic pain doesn't. It might fluctuate in intensity but it is always there. It can last anything from three months to thirty or more years. Chronic pain can come from a number of ailments: arthritis, cancer, an infection in a bone or other disease. Chronic pain resulting from back damage to nerves, spinal cord or brain is called 'neuropathic' pain. This is the type that I have. The most common forms of neuropathic pain results from shingles, sciatica or spinal conditions.

Whatever the cause of chronic pain, it can be severely debilitating and diminishes quality of life. (which has certainly been my experience).

How does chronic pain affect you?

Chronic pain feels different to different people and what you feel depends on what the cause of your chronic pain is. Tingling, crushing, burning or 'pins and needles' are common descriptors (in fact the pain felt when hitting your funny bone is a similar temporary experience of Neuropathic pain). If the actual sensation of pain isn't enough, living with chronic pain every day can affect your life in many ways.

Tiredness

Chronic pain makes you tired. Really tired! The sad irony is that having pain can also mean that you can't get to sleep at night which is doubly exhausting. When the day is over and there are no more demands placed on you, you're lying there just starting to relax and all of a sudden you're consciously aware of how bad the pain really is. It's quite common for sciatic pain to cause spasms when you relax which wake you up too.

Muscle fatigue

When you experience any type of pain, your body goes into an 'emergency mode'. You might grit or grind your teeth (and get a sore jaw), tense the muscles in your neck and shoulders, or brace yourself against the region where the pain is felt. You might not even be aware that you do it but it doesn't take long for these muscles, ligaments, and tendons to get sore themselves. If you have neuropathic pain, your whole nervous system can be aggravated and you might experience pain in seemingly unrelated regions. All this can add to your suffering.

Your appearance

Persistent chronic pain can actually change the way you appear to others. If it limits your activity you might put on weight. It might cause you to stoop, or limp or favour one limb. You might need mobility aids, braces, or cushions. Constant grimacing from the pain can over time give you frown lines! All of this can change the way others perceive you; they see the effect that chronic pain is having on your body. We had to sell our car and buy one with specific requirements so I could travel lying down.

Chronic pain affects how you relate to others.

It doesn't take long for all of these physical ailments to start affecting how you behave. Pain can change your mood; it can make you agitated, hostile or 'on edge'. When my chronic pain is bad, I find myself getting angry, snappy and aggressive toward my wife and son for no logical reason, and things that don't normally bother me all of a sudden do. Chronic pain can get you down and can lead to depression or mood swings. When chronic pain is severe, it can affect your judgement, make you forgetful or affect your concentration. All of these can take a significant toll on your loved ones; spouse, children, family or friends. It can lead to problems at work (if you CAN still work!). In some cases it even breaks families apart. It can affect your social networks, or result in you retreating from society and effectively losing friends.

Chronic pain changes you!

Mild forms of chronic pain, might not result in large changes to your lifestyle, but more severe cases of chronic pain may actually change so much about you that you no longer seem like the same person! My wife now realises that I am no longer the person that she married! Chronic pain has even altered my personality. I cannot participate in many physical activities any more. I can't play my piano, and due to medication I find my creativity gone, or simply lack motivation to participate in life at the level I once used to. It all just seems too hard; and often it just IS too hard.

Activity and price

For me the simple act of 'driving the car' was tied to my sense of self as a male, but now I can no-longer drive or even travel very far. Change can be difficult. It can affect the way you think about yourself. The limitations that chronic pain puts on you can cause a lasting sense of loss.

What to do when you have chronic pain

One of the most essential things that you can do if you suffer from chronic pain is to make sure you are getting good medical advice from the right people. Your local general practicing doctor should be able to refer you to appropriate medical specialists who will be able to assist in dealing with your specific chronic pain issues. This might include a chronic pain specialist at a hospital's "Pain Unit", occupational therapists or physiotherapists who understand chronic pain, and other specialists such as muscular-skeletal or neurological specialists. Then there is alternative medicine such as acupuncture which may be helpful (but make sure your doctor or pain specialist is aware of this).

You need help to learn how to live with this condition as well. A psychologist, support group or counsellor can help with this. My psychologist has been indispensable in helping me to come to terms with my condition, the limitations that it places upon me, and how to successfully live with this condition whilst making the most of the life that I have. He has given me the tools that I and my family need to help me manage my chronic pain; to watch for signs that my pain is peeking out, and to be aware of what triggers it and then how best to deal with it. He has also taught me hypnotherapy exercises to help 'lessen' the sensation when my pain is bad.

Caring for someone with chronic pain

If you have never experienced chronic pain, it can be very difficult to understand what it is, how it feels, and what you can do to help your partner, relative or friend who is suffering.

In our modern society, many people simply do not often encounter others with chronic medical conditions or disability. The worst medical condition they have experienced might be the flu or a cold! Seeing deformity makes us recoil, and serious medical conditions can make people feel very uncomfortable, and uncertain. And that's when people often put their foot in their mouth!

One of the most unhelpful things you can do for someone with a chronic pain condition is to start offering them medical advice. As long as the person with chronic pain is seeing good doctors and specialists most of the time they already have good advice. This seems fairly basic if you think about it, but it happens because people feel uncomfortable and want to help or feel like they HAVE to say something.

So what can you do for someone living with chronic pain? What do you say?

When you feel confronted, rather than blurting out some advice, try these;

1. Listen to them. Ask them specific questions about how they are dealing with the situation, how they are feeling etc. At least then if they want to talk about it they can. Listening shows that you care even if you can't make it better. It lets the sufferer know they are not alone.
2. Offer to help out practically. Most Australians are great at offering to help out people in need, but most Australians don't like to ask for help even when we need it; we would rather 'tough it out' and be self-sufficient. It can be hard for some people to ask for help with basic things that they now cannot do because of chronic pain. It can be really helpful then to be specific and direct with what you offer in assistance.
 - "I'm going to come over today and mow your lawn is that alright?"
 - "How about I do those dishes before I go?"
 - "I'm going to pop round next week and pick up some groceries for you. What do you need?"
3. Ask immediate family members how they are going. Sometimes the person with chronic pain is getting great treatments, counselling and care. But what about family members? One of the best things you can do for them is to ask how they are coping. It is incredibly hard to see the one you love in pain every moment of every day and know that there is nothing you can do to stop it hurting. It can be the most precious, special thing to simply ask family members how they are going.

Caring for someone with chronic pain

An interview with Therese Abraham, Stephen's wife.

Carers need to be cared for themselves! Caring for someone with chronic pain is so very important. But looking after someone day in and day out can wear you down. If you live with a loved-one who on a daily basis suffers with chronic pain, there comes a time where you need to take a break from caring. It's the only way you can continue to do your best for your loved one. It might be as simple as having a friend or counsellor to regularly share your problems with. It might be taking some time to yourself, or taking a trip away by yourself or with another friend for a few days. Looking after yourself is one of the best ways you can actually care for the one you love.

How have you handled the transition from the Steve you married to the Steve of today?

With difficulty! There continues to be a tangible sense of grief for me; my husband is now very different to the man I married. He cannot physically do what he used to, or contribute to our relationship in way he once did. Even admitting this is difficult for me because it's not his fault and I don't want to sound selfish. It is just the reality we have to deal with.

So many things can now never be. We loved dancing. We loved travelling, spontaneity, and backpacking. Travel now means meticulous planning, double the expense as Stephen has to fly business class and stay at hotels with easy access etc. Long car trips are near impossible and I have to do all the driving.

There has been such a massive adjustment in learning how to live with his condition and such a massive change to all aspects of our lives. We've had to modify the house, our bedroom and change cars. The way we socialise has to take into account how long Stephen can sit and in what position and many times we have to cancel plans at the last minute. Sometimes it all just seems too hard!

The chronic pain causes moods; agitation and irritability due to the pain and then depression due to the limitations. As Stephen's wife and carer I bear the brunt of it and have to realise "it's not Stephen talking, it's chronic pain talking!"

As a carer I struggle with admitting to Stephen any of my own maladies! I think I have no right to complain about my own aches, pains and problems because his are so much worse. Stephen is very generous to always encourage me to share how I am feeling even if I feel I shouldn't. "Every one has struggles and they are all valid" he says.

Mentally and emotionally it is exhausting. So much depends upon me now. At times I find myself trying to be both parents to our son and make up for what his Dad can't do. It's tough to accept that for us things are just different.

There are occasions when chronic pain effects Stephen cognitively due to his medication and especially when the pain is bad. His decision making is impaired and sometimes things don't end well! It's a fine line of caring for him but letting him "still be a man" and letting him "make mistakes".

Our roles have been re-defined; I am now the provider for our family and have to 'take charge'.

All in all it has been a massive adjustment, a massive change to our lives. And we still make mistakes in how we manage his pain.

But for better or for worse I still love him. Deep down we are still sweet hearts. We still have special times of joy.

But the pain is never far away.

My relationship with God has suffered through all of this too. I still believe, but our life together is just so difficult at times. With God I seem to oscillate between anger and being upset. I feel ripped off by life and then I realise that there are many who are so much worse off than we are.

With all these struggles I find it hard not to be cynical of the phrase "I'm praying for you" even though people mean well.

What has not helped

Sometimes the vital role of carers tend to be overlooked in social settings. Many times people will ask "How is Stephen?" and not think to ask "How are you going with Stephen's condition?"

People want to help but do not know how to help us. It's difficult in Aussie culture to "lower your pride" and ask for help, but it's something we have learnt how to do. In a way asking those close to us for help is a 'gift' to them; they want to help but don't know how and appreciate us asking.

What has helped you handle the situation?

Leaving home and going to my place of work has helped. At work I feel removed from our circumstance and I am not constantly confronted with my beloved partner's suffering. It's has been a form of escape for me. Sometimes I have spent too much time at work, subconsciously "hiding" from the harsh realities

of life at home. I can understand why some marriages collapse under this pressure while others “throw themselves” into their work too much and spend more time there than at home.

Rather than do this I have realised I need “carers leave” a few times a year; a few days away from Stephen just by myself to rest, recuperate, look after myself and not “be a carer”.

Exercise has also been important as a place to “work out my frustrations” and has been good for my mental health too.

We would not have survived as a couple without on-going regular counselling to help us navigate all this new territory. It is not a sign of weakness to ask for help. Stephen’s injury didn’t just wound him; it wounded our relationship and we needed an “expert” in relationships and psychology to help this heal properly.

And of course there are our close friends and family who have made the effort to learn how best to help out and socialise with us and who take the time to actually listen and ask questions about how we are coping. They are such a Godsend!

Faith and chronic pain

Back to Stephen

When my world came crashing down, I certainly felt my religious worldview challenged. As a Christian Minister, I had known people who when confronted with the question of human suffering had lost their faith entirely. Here I was now faced head-on with that same question; “If there is a God, why am I in such terrible pain?” I remember early in my journey the nights kept awake by severe pain, in terrible suffering and pondering what my life without a Christian worldview would be like; whether I should give up on God entirely! I remember asking that question “God do you even really exist?” Up until that point in my life, I had never really understood the book of Job in the Bible. It had never really made sense to me.

Soon after this, I opened my Bible and began to read the book of Job. Those of you who don’t know, this book is an ancient ‘help booklet about suffering’, told like a dramatic play, full of lessons for the reader. We hear of Job, a Godly man who loses all his children in an earthquake, then is struck with a dreadful skin disease. His suffering is deep both physically and emotionally, and much of what is said directly relates to people who suffer chronic pain. Job doesn’t just pretend that everything is OK. With tear-filled eyes he tells us how he is feeling (Job 3:1-16, 6:1-7:21). Page after page he expresses the ins and outs of his suffering, which is a model and reminder for us to do the same. (I have a reminder in my diary to do this at least once a month).

*“Obliterate the day I was born.
Blank out the night I was conceived!
Let it be a black hole in space.
May God above forget it ever happened.
Erase it from the books!
May the day of my birth be buried in deep darkness,
shrouded by the fog,
swallowed by the night.
And the night of my conception—the devil take it!
Rip the date off the calendar,
delete it from the almanac.
Oh, turn that night into pure nothingness—
no sounds of pleasure from that night, ever!
May those who are good at cursing curse that day.
Unleash the sea beast, Leviathan, on it.
May its morning stars turn to black cinders,
waiting for a daylight that never comes,
never once seeing the first light of dawn.
And why? Because it released me from my mother’s womb
into a life with so much trouble.*

*“Why didn’t I die at birth,
my first breath out of the womb my last?
Why were there arms to rock me,
and breasts for me to drink from?
I could be resting in peace right now,
asleep forever, feeling no pain,
In the company of kings and statesmen
in their royal ruins,
Or with princes resplendent
in their gold and silver tombs.
Why wasn’t I stillborn and buried
with all the babies who never saw light,
Where the wicked no longer trouble anyone
and bone-weary people get a long-deserved rest?
Prisoners sleep undisturbed,
never again to wake up to the bark of the guards.
The small and the great are equals in that place,
and slaves are free from their masters.*

(Job 3:3-19. The Message)

Longing for his suffering to go away, Job wishes he had never been born! (Job 3:1-16) He would rather die than go on living! (Job 7:15-16). When I read this, I suddenly realised that it was okay to occasionally have these kind of thoughts and feelings; that it is natural to feel this way in the midst of terrible pain. But there is a difference between 'just wanting the pain to stop', and being suicidal. (If you ever have detailed thoughts about ending your life, it is imperative that you talk to someone about it immediately.)

Job's wife says to him that he should give up on God entirely (Job 2:9). And although he doesn't ultimately do this, he does for a time lose respect for God (Job 5:14). This tells us that in times of great suffering, it is okay to question one's faith, to be angry with God, or to feel like giving up on your faith. God is big enough to be able to handle you getting upset with him from time to time!

Job too experiences the best and worst in his friends. To begin with they do the right thing; they sit with him quietly, not offering any advice or solutions or miracle cures! They rip their clothes as a sign that they will suffer with him. Then they sit and listen and are just 'there for him' for seven whole days (Job 2:11-13). (I think this is what we ALL need from our friends in the midst of our suffering). But then his friends start talking and offering advice and 'wisdom' which ultimately doesn't help Job at all.

Finally there are some clues to the big questions about God and suffering. As Job says; "Why is life so hard? Why do we suffer?" (Job 7:1).

There is this understanding throughout Scripture that life itself is a mixture of great good and significant hardship. Job himself says, "... Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?" (Job 2:7). Jesus himself admitted that there will always be poverty (John 12:7). Suffering and being human go hand in hand in this lifetime! But so does joy and love.

Furthermore, in "The Beatitudes" (Matthew 5:1-12) Jesus shares hidden truth; that God's blessing, grace and love is present in a special way to those who suffer; that when you suffer, God's love is close by and that ultimately at the end of time all our suffering will be swept away.

At end of the Book of Job, Job's life experiences some restoration. Despite all that has happened, and even with the scars of the past still marking his life, Job experiences prosperity, joy and God's blessings on his life. Although I would not wish my condition on anyone, for me there is blessing amidst the suffering; in the closeness I have to my family and the way they continue to support me and my family, in the way my son has developed a mature sense of compassion at a young age, in the health and financial support available to me in this country and in the simplicity my life now has.

There are no concrete answers to Job's question, but at least in my experience there is enough here that I can keep on living and enjoying the simple pleasures of life even with the burden I carry every day.

Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. He does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. He knows us far better than we know ourselves, our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good.

(Romans 8:26-28. The Message)

Where to from here?

Chronic pain is not a death sentence. I hope this booklet helps you with your chronic pain or helps someone you know who is dealing with chronic pain.

I encourage you to seek help from doctors, family and friends and in God himself, who is with you through it all – even through the anger. Jesus Christ went through enormous suffering and is with you through your journey of pain.

There is help, you don't have to do it alone.

*My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever.*

(Psalm 73:26. NIV)

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