

- Community Forum
- Painful Conditions
- Ask the Doctor
- Emotional Pain
- In the News
- Library
- Pain Clinics
- Complementary & Alternative Medicine
- Drug Store



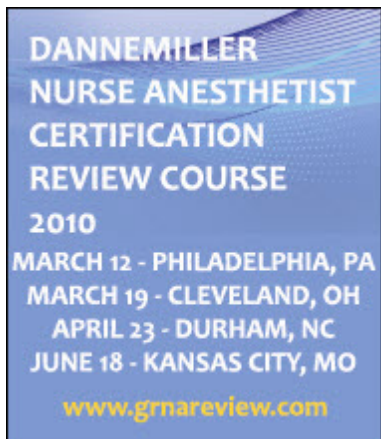
- [Home](#)
- » [Consumer](#)
- » [Library](#)
- » [Not Defined by Pain](#)

Not Defined by Pain

By Rebecca Rengo MA, MSW, LCSW, ACSW

Someone whistling; glares; being bumped-- these are just a few of the obstacles Rebecca faces daily. Food is a land mine. She cannot have wheat, dairy, tough foods, or chewy foods. Due to multiple chronic health conditions her life is like walking a tightrope. It's a delicate balancing act; even a minor incident can aggravate pain. Food allergies, Temporal Mandipular Joint dysfunction (TMJ), multiple whiplash injuries, headaches, gastrointestinal problems, fibromyalgia-- the list goes on and on. Yet, to look at her she appears healthy.

Her troubles started as a teenager and by her early 20s she had suicidal ideation as the suffering was unbearable. Doctors told her she was "just too emotional." She didn't receive pain medications or treatment until much later. After years of agony, she fell into a deep depression but no one seemed to notice. Even more disturbing was that no one believed her. Her family thought she was "lazy." A long term relationship ended. At a time in her life when she desperately



wanted care and compassion she received disdain.

According to Barry Aaronson, PhD, Director of Behavioral Health at Sovereign Health in San Clemente, CA, "It's common for chronic pain patients to have more than one pain condition. They become deconditioned; don't exercise; walk differently, and twist their spine; they don't move their body equally; they tense up; their immune system is affected. Pain can cause sleep deprivation and cognitive problems. The fight or flight response is over activated."

Dr. Aaronson goes on to say, "The person with chronic pain frequently develops anxiety and depression. Adversarial relationships with family and friends develop. Some doctors don't understand the psychological side. People tell them it's in your head."

Rebecca heard that a lot. She thought, "It's in my head alright; my jaw and my neck, too." It took 10 years to get a TMJ diagnosis; 20 years for her neck. She was diagnosed with fibrositic disorder, now known as fibromyalgia, when she went to a rheumatologist for arthritis. More problems and more diagnoses piled up. She wasn't given many options and what she tried didn't help. Rebecca went from being told nothing was wrong to a long list of diagnoses, but still no treatment.

Rebecca felt alone, isolated, and hopeless. A young woman with her future ahead of her she wasn't ready to give up on life. She tried counseling but couldn't find anyone who understood her situation. She realized it was up to her. So, she became licensed as a psychotherapist. She focused on health, but soon realized she couldn't separate health from mental health and everyday stress. How you coped with one affected the others. She constantly researched options to help her understand. She studied concepts in medicine, psychology, religion/spirituality, motivational, and complementary and alternative resources. She prayed for guidance. She realized the better she was doing and the more options she had for her clients, the better they did.

Rebecca realized she had self-sabotaging behaviors that she saw in her clients. She knew there were many simple things she could do. For example, instead of just wishing things were different, Rebecca began appreciating what was good. She was overwhelmed with a house that needed repairs. Realizing the value of gratitude she walked through each room and thanked God for her blessings. By the end of this exercise she no longer hated her house and instead felt filled with joy.

She decided to work on one sabotaging behavior a month. One of those techniques involved ridding herself of "toxic" people from her life. While challenging, it turned out to be one of the most healing things she did for herself. This is a technique that Rabbi Edgar Weinsberg, author of "Conquer Prostate Cancer: How Medicine, Faith, Love and Sex Can Renew Your Life," also encourages. He wrote, "Rely on positive interactions with others, in formal groups or in informal settings. I refer to this as the 'you are not alone' dynamic. And here I should say I do NOT subscribe to the notion that misery loves company. Rather, this is a matter of turning to people with comparable experiences, who have their act together, despite ongoing concerns, and remain above the fray." She found that by



taking just one technique and incorporating it for a month the new attitude became part of her lifestyle.

Rebecca was now taking care of herself. She was getting eight hours of sleep; regular, light exercise; eating healthy; and getting preventative medical and dental care. She nurtured herself with bubble baths, reading, and watching movies. Pacing was an important part of her daily routine. She gradually increased activities, like walking five extra minutes, and was careful not to overdo things. Rebecca was always committed to volunteer work and didn't want to give that up, but she did learn to set boundaries and say "no." She was open minded and willing to try new things. She even learned scuba diving and now travels all over the world with her husband and friends to dive. Everyone she dives with understands her situation and makes simple accommodations when diving with her.

Rebecca accepts herself as she is and is realistic about what she can do. She makes adjustments as needed while living life to the fullest. Her clients have taught her how painful it is to look back with regrets. Chronic pain does not define who she is. She only discusses her pain conditions and experiences if it will benefit others. She is grateful for her life and remains hopeful she will improve even more.

Rebecca is dedicated to helping others with the knowledge, understanding, and techniques that have benefited her. Working with health and pain organizations, physicians, and complementary and alternative providers, as well as in her own practice, her mission is to empower people to live their best lives with whatever conditions they have. People feeling depressed and overwhelmed with multiple health and pain conditions often tell Rebecca, "I want to do the things you do." She tells them, "Have patience with small steps. Practice intention without attachment. Always be very gentle with yourself." There are so many simple yet profound shifts that can totally reshape your life. I know; I am Rebecca.

About the Author: Rebecca Rengo is well-known as an expert in managing chronic pain. She speaks from experience; she has worked in healthcare for more than 26 years and has lived with chronic pain for 35 years. She currently provides pain relief coaching and speaks to healthcare, professional, and other organizations. For more about Rebecca, visit www.beyondchronicpain.com.

