

Living with Pain

Four cornerstones for soothing body, mind and spirit

All of us experience physical pain sometimes. For me, it's typically a migraine that arrives like an uninvited guest, threatening to spoil my plans. Thankfully, my medication usually escorts it out the door.

For people living with chronic pain, however, the unwelcome guest moves in. Although the intensity of pain can fluctuate — sometimes lessening or disappearing — it does not leave permanently.

Seeing some of my clients struggle with chronic pain, particularly from fibromyalgia, I have witnessed their emotional anguish, as well as their perseverance and courage. Over time, they grieve the loss of their “normal” life and begin living the best life they can in their present condition. They navigate many ups and downs along the way, sometimes losing and then rediscovering hope in a different form.

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Rebecca Rengo-Kocher, St. Louis-area author of *Beyond Chronic Pain*, understands this journey. As an educator and social worker, she helps patients suffering from chronic pain. She serves as a well-traveled guide with firsthand knowledge: She also is a pain survivor.

“I have suffered with chronic pain for more than 30 years, my entire adult life,” she says. “For many years, my pain was a 10 on a scale of 1 to 10.”

Now she usually rates her pain a 2. She attributes this improvement to four cornerstones: hope, faith, perseverance and love.

Move forward with hope

Hope gives us the energy to move ahead. First, we must make room for it. This means coming to terms with reality — the way life is now — by grieving and accepting losses. Chronic pain takes away the ability to do certain things now and in the future.

“If you don't grieve through these feelings, you become ‘stuck.’ If you are stuck, you cannot live successfully with chronic pain,” Rengo-Kocher explains. “Process your anger, fear and sadness toward your doctors, the pain, God, your family, yourself.”

To move forward, your pain must be tolerable. Rengo-Kocher insists that pain management rank as a top priority. Her advice



might sound shocking to those who put everyone else first. “Your efforts to reduce pain must come before your children, your spouse, your job, your house and everything else. Once you have the pain at a manageable level, you can then work on reducing it more, at a slower pace, taking the rest of your life into account,” she says.

Hope depends on an open heart and mind. Without these, we close off opportunities for learning, growing and healing.

“When I look back on my own journey with chronic pain, I see many benefits from almost everything I’ve tried, as well as the varied people I have met along the way,” she says.

Meditation helped her enjoy the moment and feel closer to God. Visualization helped her reach health, career and personal goals. Cognitive-behavioral techniques helped her change self-defeating patterns.

With the right mindset, hope can blossom in the present.

“Believe you are worthy of pleasure and happiness right now,” Rengo-Kocher says. “You do not have to wait for the pain to become better or go away. Enjoy your life now.”

“Gratitude multiplies our blessings. The more we practice gratitude, the more things we find to appreciate.”

You might need to find new ways to feel pleasure. For example, if you can’t run in the park, enjoy it by walking or by going in a wheelchair.

Hope often takes root in spirituality, something Rengo-Kocher has actively cultivated. However, she doesn’t think that belief in a spiritual power will necessarily make life easier. It can give us hope and a sense of inner peace and grace.

Find peace through faith

Faith rarely arises out of the blue. It requires our effort to find and maintain it. Rengo-Kocher recommends working on your faith in ways that feel comfortable to you. These might include prayer, spiritual reading, meditation, attending religious services and joining a study or discussion group. Whatever works for you, schedule time every day to practice your faith.

She also teaches gratitude. Despite your

pain, find something to be grateful for — even if it’s as simple as surviving a difficult day. Each day, appreciate what you can.

“Your pain may be so intense and depressing, the only positives may seem totally separate from you,” she says.

In that case, be grateful for a lovely sunset, the sound of birdsong, a friend’s visit, a tasty treat. Gratitude multiplies our blessings. The more we practice gratitude, the more things we find to appreciate.

Sometimes faith can help you find positive meaning or purpose in your pain, she explains, which lessens its negative impact. You might appreciate and value others more, develop problem-solving skills or become stronger emotionally.

Finally, faith helps us accept not having all the answers.

Persevere despite setbacks

Healing takes time and often happens in small steps. Don’t sabotage yourself by setting unrealistic goals, warns Rengo-Kocher. Set more attainable goals if you’re feeling frustrated. Pace yourself and continue to do the things that keep you stabilized.

“Each time you backslide, it’s harder to regroup,” she says. “No one is perfect, and you’ll have times when you have contributed to a flare-up.”

At such times, it’s important to refocus and re-evaluate your goal, possibly setting a smaller goal. Remember, progress is not about speed; it’s about direction.

When you’re not feeling or doing as well as you’d like, it’s easy to be consumed by discouragement. Rengo-Kocher recommends giving yourself credit every day for the things you have accomplished. Don’t analyze whether you did enough or should have done more, she says. Depending on your level of pain, getting out of bed, paying a bill or complimenting someone count as accomplishments.

Nothing can hold you back like depression. “Do not accept feeling depressed as a part of your pain,” she says. Get help by seeing your doctor and a therapist.

Rebecca Rengo-Kocher



Rengo-Kocher shares tips on back pain in her book *Beyond Chronic Pain*.

Open yourself to love

Love for others and ourselves brings healing. When we get consumed with our pain and frustration, it’s easy to neglect those around us. Rengo-Kocher recommends giving other people positive attention — let them talk and listen to them. Don’t always make it about you and your health issues. Engage in relationships in which you can give and receive.

In that spirit, it’s important to help others in need.

“No matter how bad you feel, there are people who feel worse, who are in more pain, who are more disabled, in less fortunate circumstances, who have less support and fewer resources. No matter what your situation is, find a way to reach out to someone else,” she says.

Because other people will not always understand and validate your pain, you must be able to do so yourself. Give up your need for approval from others, and approve of yourself. Do what you believe is best to take care of yourself, she advises.

Finally, she advocates self-love, reminding us that pain is not a punishment. It does not mean you are less worthy than others.

“Be gentle with yourself,” she counsels wisely. “Treat yourself as you would treat your mother, child or best friend. Give yourself all the compassion and understanding you need. Love yourself — with all your imperfections and pain.” W

As a licensed therapist in private practice, Wampler hopes to help people become who they were created to be. You can visit her Web site at www.floweringfromwithin.com.