

Finding Relief

How does one find any measure of relief amidst gripping pain, profound sadness, or busy thoughts? We are not taught in school what to do when we are kept awake at night because of what is happening with our bodies and minds.

Severe pain was my teacher for many years. I tried everything I came upon in order to cope through those years. To my surprise, what I learned helped me to cope not only with physical pain but also emotional and mental pain.

You might be saying, "What do you mean by *mental pain*?" Have you ever had thoughts running around in your head and no matter how you tried to avoid or change them, they kept coming back? The thoughts aren't helping you; they are hurting you just like prolonged physical pain hurts you. Emotional pain takes many forms: rage, anguish, despair, grief, and jealousy to name a few.

Have you had times where you coped very well with one or all of these types of pain? Were you able to put your finger on what helped you cope?

In some ways my being in bed unable to do anything was a blessing. I made a commitment to learn to cope with pain as best I could and then to share what I learned.

I started with sciatica pain because it was constant and confined to one section of the body. I spent literally hundreds of hours getting to know it, and I know I've barely scratched the surface. Yet it enabled me to drive 1,000 miles

with a cramp in my foot and to relax when I was by myself and too weak to lift my head off the pillow to call for help.

What causes any type of pain to feel worse? Tensing up? Yes and no. If you look closely, you'll see that we are able to shut down pain to some degree. We tense up because oftentimes it works . . . well, at least initially. We can ignore the pain . . . for awhile. We can curse and blame the pain and get some measure of relief by empowering ourselves.

Yet ignoring, fighting, or wallowing in pain never affords us true relief. We do them because they provide **some** relief. Drugs are a way of fighting pain. They are absolutely necessary at times, but I wonder how the next generation will cope with pain. Commercials make it sound like we are entitled to a pain-free existence. Subconsciously, we become disempowered and less self-reliant.

Advertising often tries to increase a need. Wouldn't it be nice if this were offset by teaching coping skills to our children in school? You have a headache; you're depressed; you keep running over the argument you had yesterday in your head. None of us is immune to these things and yet we spend virtually no time getting to know how such things work in our bodies. I was amazed to realize that physical, mental and emotional "pains" work in very similar ways.

Here's what I noticed with the sciatica pain experiments: Pain wants to move. It may want to spread and it may want to tighten down or even both at the same time, but if you look very closely, you'll find that it's nature is to constantly change. Perhaps it goes from burning to throbbing or from prickly to a dull ache.

Forcing it to hold still is a lot like trying to force a 2-year-old to sit still. It may work for awhile, but its likely to make things violent in the long run.

Fear for me was the root of this subconscious effort to get the pain to hold still. Yes, that's right, we deal with most all of our pains in a subconscious way, but we can bring it into consciousness relatively easily.

Fear increases any kind of pain and it shows itself in a huge variety of ways: We are quick to judge anything that hurts or feels uncomfortable as "bad." We attack, suppress or become glued to the pain. Each of these increases or distorts the pain.

But what is pain without all the labels? Sensation. And if you look even closer, it's energy vibrating.

I have found that the first and most effective thing I can do with pain of any kind is to stop judging it and start opening up to it in a detached way. With the sciatica, as well as with my grief or worries, I relax myself by saying I won't go to pieces if it gets a little stronger, louder or more persistent. Sometimes I must remind myself that no one ever dies from pain. If a pain level gets too high one passes out and is accorded immediate relief.

I get very still and I watch. I am not my body, my emotions or my thoughts. I can watch all these things so I know they are not me. They are merely sensations moving through space. Ah, space. When you watch real closely (this takes some experience), you see how the sensations arise from and shrink back down to delicious space, or you could call it a quietness or emptiness, yet it's paradoxically full of peace and rich with virtue.

Put on your analyst or scientist hat and look closely at emotion, thought and pain. You'll see how oftentimes the loudness or strength will rise and fall rhythmically. But I must warn you, you'll have to spend time adjusting your attitude and getting to know how sensations move before you'll be able to know pains unfettered dance.

Perhaps you are familiar with a foot or calf cramp. It gets real intense then backs off then gets real intense again. It keeps doing this until it's burned itself out. However, if you walk on it right away, many more pains cloud the picture. It is possible to have a severe foot cramp and not feel like you are suffering. What I mean is that it doesn't feel like a problem or "bad" in any way. Its not a pleasant experience, but its not an unpleasant experience when you learn how to simply observe and allow the pain to run its course.

If you watch grief or anger, you'll see how it gets stronger and weaker in your body. Grief and anger are simply body sensations and thoughts. With grief you might have prickly sensations around your eyes and a heavy feeling in your throat or chest. With anger you might feel heat or tension in your arms. Find a sensation and watch it like a child might watch an inch worm. See if you can open to it. Give it permission to move this way or that and see what happens. Give it permission to expand or contract a little. What happens?

Now take a thought like, "I've got too much to do." Watch how the volume and pitch of the thought rises in your mind. See how many times the same type of thought arises. Give the thoughts permission to come as fast and loud as they want. If you have trouble distancing yourself from the content of the thought, try

listening to each sound in each word so that you are focusing only on the noises instead of any meaning. Repeat the thought very slowly and out loud if you have difficulty.

It amazed me when I started to see a pattern. Thought is really very much like emotional or physical sensations. And what are sensations? Perhaps they are simply energy pulsing.

If I am able to relax into a thought, an emotion or a pain, then often it will pulse a few times (usually the first few pulses will feel threatening) and then it dissipates. What's left is lightness and freedom as if a great blockage has been freed. I feel light and joyous. Work gets done effortlessly. Decisions make themselves. Sleep comes easily.

The key is in realizing that you are subconsciously afraid of the discomfort whether it be from thoughts, emotions or physical sensations. Fear manifests itself in three basic ways: by latching onto the discomfort, by fighting the discomfort or by avoiding/ignoring the discomfort. All three ways initially decrease the discomfort which is why we do them, but all three backfire and cause more discomforts.

Love heals. By this I mean *unconditional* love. Pain is the body and mind's way of healing itself. The more I look into it, the more I'm convinced that pain is not the bad character we make it out to be. U.S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt once said, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Yet we don't know ourselves well enough to see how fear pervades our lives. Fear is an ingrained habit. It takes awhile to see this lifelong habit, let alone change it,

but each small step eases the insidious suffering that plagues us all, especially during the long hours of the night, or the times we are stuck in a situation where we are unable to do anything to distract ourselves from discomfort.

Simply being aware of the possibility of changing our perceptions can bring hope and relief. It might be difficult to think of pain as a friend and certainly we don't want to be masochistic, but if we can realize that pain is doing a job, we may be able to help facilitate it so that we do not thwart its actions and pile misery on top of misery.

Experts, such as Shinzen Young, are aware of even more subtle dynamics of pain, what might be called the physics of pain and body sensation. The more awareness and concentration we are able to develop, the more we can allow body sensations, thoughts and even images do their job. And what is the true nature of that job? Find out and your life will be enriched forever.

The only way to truly know is through systematic practice on yourself. Whatever causes problems in your life is a great place to start, although it is wise to take something small enough so that you won't get overwhelmed. For me, physical sensation was the easiest, especially if I didn't have much emotion around the pain or itch. Next in difficulty were the sensations in the body that were emotional in nature, and the hardest, for me personally, were the thoughts themselves, although this varied day-by-day.