A Therapist's Healing Journey Through Chronic Pain

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I was kneeling on the floor with my elbows and upper body propped on my couch at 2:00 AM for the umpteenth night in a row, praying that I could contort my body into some position that wouldn't send explosive fireworks of pain from my lower back down my hips and legs. I wasn't a stranger to back pain, but this pain was excruciatingly different. At the time, in the midst of winter, I felt dark and hopeless. If someone had told me I'd be on the other side of it a year later writing about my experience with the hope of helping others, I wouldn't have believed them.

This e-book is designed to share my experience so that you or someone you love who is in pain doesn't feel alone. This is designed to be the resource I spent sleepless nights searching for. This is the roadmap out of the mental and physical anguish that can take you to dark, dark places. This is a hopeful guide of simple steps and countless hours of personal and professional research. This is movement forward.

You can heal your pain as I did and as I do every day. Don't wait for someone to find an answer for you or take care of you. You have to seek that out for youself. You have to take charge of your own health, and you can start now. I'm with you. Let's go.

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About The Author

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I'm a mom, a wife, a nature lover, a traveler, a wannabe yogi, a reader, a foodie, a health psychologist, and a nutritional therapy consultant. In over 10 years of practice, I've treated hundreds of clients with pain, anxiety, depression, stress, and more. I've also lived with crippling back pain and know the mental and physical toll it takes. I know, first-hand, the impact that chronic pain has on relationships and your belief in yourself. Writing about my journey and the techniques I've found, through research and personal experience, is the next phase in my healing journey.

Join me.
Many of my favorite health and personal development professionals have said that they’ve had an “on my knees” moment of dark despair (e.g., Christine Hassler, Elizabeth Gilbert) or a health crisis (e.g., Christa Orecchio, Chris Kresser) that caused them to pursue their personal healing path and, subsequently, to teach others how to be healthier… both in mind and body. These professionals wrote about their experiences once they were safely on the other side of the crisis. I admired that but was simultaneously grateful that I had no such health crisis or "on my knees" moment of despair…until December 10th. And I am writing this while still very much in the midst of the crisis.

December 10th… I wore my favorite pair of black boots (which had a bit more of a heel than most of my other, more sensible footwear) to a Holiday party. After about two hours at the party, my back felt uncomfortably tight. As we walked to our car and I sat in the driver’s seat, my back and my glutes began to spasm…not like the “oh I feel a twinge” spasm but the “this feels like my back could rip in half” spasm. After a torturous 20 minute drive home, I somehow made it into bed, praying that rest would heal all. It didn’t. I woke to a very similar condition, but now, the pain was concentrated in my left glute. I had had issues with my piriformis muscle (small muscle in the glute region adjacent to the sciatic nerve) before, so I assumed that after a few days of the dreaded pigeon pose and other stretches, I’d ease back into normal patterns of life. But, this pain was an entirely different beast. I couldn’t sit down because pain would shoot from my glutes upward to my lower back and downward all the way to my toes. So I stood…for everything—for work, for meals, for putting together puzzles at the counter with my son. I endured
it for many days, still hoping it would ease on its own (not likely, I know, but I can be stubborn). After having to get up multiple times every night for the past 6 nights to pace the house because lying in bed was painful, I called Uncle.

Bright and early Saturday morning, I wedged myself into the car and drove to my primary care walk in clinic. After a brief examination, the doc told me he didn’t think it was serious and prescribed muscle relaxers, narcotics, and prednisone and instructed me to try the first, and if it didn’t bring relief, discontinue and move to the second. I loathe taking medication, but this was a desperate time, and desperate times called for muscle relaxers, which did nothing, so I progressed to the narcotic which made me feel spacey and may have caused me to incorrectly label some of the Christmas gifts I was attempting to wrap from an awkward standing position. After a couple of days, I realized the narcotics had no value, and I tried community and individual acupuncture. I started physical therapy with a very reputable firm in the area in which the diagnosis of piriformis syndrome was confirmed, and I increased the frequency of visits to my craniosacral physical therapist
who had helped me correct anterior pelvic tilt. I went to the chiropractor like it was my job. And still...no relief. So, after wandering the halls of my house early, early, early Christmas morning, I googled “prednisone side effects.” I read the facts and decided the side effects were worth the risk. I gulped down two prednisone tablets and hoped for the best. Within about 20 minutes, I felt my back and sacroiliac joint unfurl, and I slept.

Christmas morning, the pain was better but still mostly miserable. Walking (aka hobbling) was more comfortable than sitting or lying, so we stayed in motion most of Christmas day. Between Christmas and the new year, I underwent more PT, more chiropractor adjustments, and the pain still remained. I started intently researching...okay obsessively researching. Treatments from Dr. Google spanned the gamut from bed rest to rolling with tennis balls to surgery. Sigh. I tried a lot, and nothing worked. After physical techniques were failing, I turned back to my roots and looked at the mind-body connection, and that is where the next phase of the journey began.
Prenote: I’m not comfortable with vulnerability (especially public vulnerability!!), but I have learned much from Brene Brown’s work and think that vulnerability is part of healing, so here we go…

My pride pushed back on the idea of a mind-body syndrome such as tension myositis syndrome (TMS) causing my pain. I’m a mind body psychologist! How could my back/glute/hamstring pain be related to the mind-body? Well, it’s a thing called blind spots…we often don’t see the things in ourselves that are so seemingly obvious in others! The premise of TMS is that inner tension caused by repressed emotions (namely, anger and guilt) or an inability to be present with and express current feelings causes tension that creates oxygen deprivation which manifests as pain. The most common location…you guessed it, the back and glutes. In addition, pain can manifest in the neck, as plantar fasciitis, acid reflux, anxiety, depression, tinnitus, vertigo, IBS, and the list goes on.

I ordered Dr. Sarno’s book, Healing Back Pain: The Mind Body Connection, and eagerly awaited its arrival. In the meantime, I perused websites and read book reviews of the treatment that sounded, quite honestly, too good to be true. This is coming from the person who teaches mind-body techniques!! The evidence was mounting. The list of characteristics of individuals who are most commonly diagnosed with TMS looked like a report card of my personality characteristics:

- Perfectionistic (Check, although I’ve really been working on that)
- Striving (Check, but isn’t that a good thing?)
I stopped all treatments and spent a few days really delving into what I might be repressing or what I might not be expressing. I started journaling, and although I didn’t think I would have anything to write, I was surprised that my pen moved with relative ease until my timer chimed. I didn’t have a miraculous release of pain that I had read journaling could bring about, but I did feel a bit more like myself. I decided to find out the extent to which TMS might be contributing to the pain, so I had a session with a TMS therapist. She explained her personal experience and confirmed that my history and personal characteristics were consistent with TMS; however, she was not a doctor so she could not definitively say if TMS was the root cause. I left feeling a mix of relief and confusion. The action steps (in a nutshell) were to continue writing about feelings and move on with life.

Several weeks prior to finding out about TMS, I had scheduled an appointment with an orthopedic doc (or at least his PA) and hesitated about attending the appointment when it finally arrived. I had done lots of research and found that back and disc issues are not necessarily correlated with pain (Brinjikji et al., 2014). In fact, some research indicated that outcomes were actually worse for individuals who had had an MRI because doctors treated the results of the MRI rather than treating the person. So, when I overheard the PA ordering the MRI and a prescription anti-inflammatory outside the room before he even saw me, every instinct in my body told me to leave, but the good little patient inside me (see do-gooder in the checklist above)
stayed. He pushed on my legs for a minute, dismissed the idea that muscles such as the piriformis or any other muscular or emotional issue could be contributing, and told me to return after the MRI. The MRI experience sucked...for lack of better terminology.

While waiting until the next week for the results of the MRI to be discussed with the arrogant orthopedic PA, I went back to researching other options and found Foundation Training. I watched a long interview of the founder of the Foundation Training, Dr. Eric Goodman, a chiropractor who was told he needed back surgery in chiropractic school. I was definitely intrigued. My local library had the Foundation Training book and DVD. I walked to get it the next day. I started the exercises which seemed way harder than they looked. Within a few days, I was standing straighter, but the glute, hamstring, and foot pain remained. I continued on with the exercises and kept searching for other potential contributors.

I found a book called the Permanent Pain Cure by Min Chew. I was fascinated at the connection between tight fascia and pain. And because
my Amazon prime account is the only part of me that has been getting a workout, I clicked “Add to Cart” and awaited its arrival. The exercises are complicated...no doubt about that. It took over 20 minutes to get into the correct position and complete the first exercise. I definitely felt muscles/tendons/ligaments/etc. that I hadn’t felt while doing the list of more standard stretches that I had accumulated from my visits to PTs, chiropractors, and docs. However, my intuition told me that this, too, was not the silver bullet. I added two of the most relevant stretches to my growing routine and kept looking for help.

Reference

By this point, the list of providers that I had seen was longer than my son’s Christmas list (and that’s saying something). As you might imagine, I was/am feeling beyond frustrated that none of these providers could help me. And it’s not so much that I expect one to have the magic wand to fix everything, but having someone who cared enough to put the emotional and physical pieces together and examine the whole me…not just what is going on at the space in my spine between L4 and L5 (the results of the MRI indicated a bulging disc on the opposite side of my pain), but to also look at my history of SI joint issues exacerbated by pregnancy, and to note that my hamstring muscle seems to be tight and twisted which might be related to why my ankle keeps swelling…and I haven’t even touched acknowledging the role that stress and muscle tension might be having in this whole mess.

I’m trying not to think about this experience as a mess, but rather as an opportunity to learn. I recognize that we are all energy, and pain is energy. So how can I change the perception/vibration of that energy? I’ve asked my journal, my subconscious, and anyone who will listen, “What am I supposed to be learning here? How can I use this experience to understand what I am supposed to be doing?” So, far, the answer has been…silence. But I have looked at my thoughts and the stories I am telling myself about this experience and have reframed them from worrisome, “Will this ever get better? When can I play with my son again? Will I ever be able to workout?” to “This is a temporary inconvenience. Take all that I can learn from it.

You will get through this.” The constant cognitive reframing is challenging, even for someone who teaches it regularly to my clients, but
it works. I know it does.

Taking a breath...I dialed in to my biweekly conference call for the 

**Nutritional Therapy Association’s (NTA)** Nutritional Therapy Consultant (NTC) training course. I’m grateful to be a group leader for this course one year after graduating. The information is so rich that I’m learning much even after already being exposed to it as a student in the course last year. **Check them out** if you want to learn more about the awesome nutritional education. But I digress, I was on the conference call, and a student was presenting a case study. Among other issues, the student’s client had sciatica. The instructor said, “Stop right there. What does that mean?” I was screaming in my head “Yes, WHAT DOES THAT MEAN??!!” She proceeded to talk about the connection between sciatica and an unstable pelvis with adrenal fatigue often exacerbated by excess caffeine consumption. She detailed the process as follows:

A susceptible individual taxes her adrenals in one of many ways such as:

- Emotional stress
- Physical stress
- Pain
- Caffeine consumption
- Excessive exercise
- Overwork
- Nutritional deficiencies/severe allergies

Through a biochemical, physiological mechanism that wasn’t completely detailed (and would have been over my head anyway), the taxed adrenals do not adequately support joints and ligaments, especially the sacroiliac joint and its associated ligaments.

This causes ligament laxity and can cause the anterior superior iliac spine (ASIS- essentially the top, bony part of the pelvis and the site of attachment for the important Sartorius and tensor fascia latae muscles) to rock backwards, putting pressure on the sciatic nerve. This can cause pain at the site as well as referred pain down the path of the sciatic nerve.
Light bulbs and neon lights were flashing to the sound of bells ringing in my head. Somehow, I felt as if this was a crucial piece of my puzzle. I had been on an adrenal recovery protocol and had made good strides prior to this, but adrenal healing can take a long time...like a year or more, so I was very much still on the path when all of this went down. It made sense, though, I have a susceptibility to this due to my body structure and habits, coupled with the initial emotional stress triggering the spasms that led to a cascade of muscle tightness and torquing. I still don’t have all the answers, but I’m feeling way more informed. At the same time, I’m furious (See how I’m expressing anger :) ) that NONE of the informed providers that I saw in any field (PT, TMS, chiro, orthopedics, massage) was able to cobble these together. It probably didn’t help that my PT called to check on me given that I’d been out for 30 days and punted me back to my primary care doc rather than really taking an interest in what was going on. Sigh. Anyway, I know the body is way too complex for one-modality of treatment to fix it, but I was/am still feeling so much anger that none of these practitioners had mentioned other modalities or taken the time to care enough to explore other factors. That’s when a second round of light bulbs and bells went off...I may not have the technical expertise of all of these areas, but I definitely listen to my clients and help them to put pieces together, making the connections between emotional and physical issues that are very much real. Looks like it’s time for me to be my own client.

With my newfound knowledge of the important role that my adrenals are likely playing, I went cold turkey off caffeine...okay, not 100% true, I still drink my beloved Jasmine Green Tea that I steep and then discard twice to reduce/nearly eliminate caffeine...and stopped the recently-developed habit of pulling a second shot from my husband’s morning espresso. I purchased Dandy Blend from my local health food store to replace my coffee crush. Although this dandelion-chicory blend could not be mistaken for a rich cup of freshly ground coffee, it is satisfying in its own way and quite delish when blended Bulletproof style with butter and coconut oil. Plus, I’m well aware of the benefits of dandelion to the liver and detox systems...and, hey, who couldn’t use more of that. To
restore my adrenals, I also resumed kundalini meditation (more on that in an upcoming post), kicked up my carb intake with sweet potatoes and friend plantains (gotta love that!), returned to my adrenal adaptogens and supplements, and tried to chill the eff out :)

*Note. Treatment for adrenal issues can be complex. I have no affiliation with this program, but Paleo Rehab is a program developed to improve adrenal health. It was developed by two nutritionists, Laura Schoenfeld and Kelsey Marksteiner, who have worked with and are endorsed by Chris Kresser. It seems to be a solid, science and experience-backed system, and the reviews speak for themselves.

I also realized that this pain had made me rather self-absorbed, so I started looking outside myself and committed to random acts of kindness to help others: sent aid to a friend whose family is going through a serious illness, gave a gift to my son's school admin assistant, and focused on being fully present with my son (hence, lots of exploding volcano science experiments have been happening in our kitchen).

I also returned, with family in tow, to my local donation-based chiropractic practice that I had frequented last year. Something about the chiro’s calm demeanor, soothing voice, oh and the ability to say, “Your left SI is way out of balance. Let me try these two techniques. They will help,” reaffirmed that I was on the right track.

To sum up, I wrote this for a few reasons:

1. It was cathartic, and expressing how we feel is healing.
2. I wish I had read something that provided both information and hope as I was going through the worst of it. Maybe this post can be a light for one person.
3. Healing is a journey, and writing this helped me to see that. In our instant gratification society, sometimes it really is about the journey and not the magic bullet.
4. Vulnerability is scary if you believe it is. And I had to prove to myself that I could be vulnerable and put this out there for the service of others.
A strong back. Just like that picture. That's my goal picture. And I've realized that it's called a journey because there really is no “end,” right? Well, I'm still on the path. Two weeks ago, I was performing my “Stretches for a Healthy Back” (and that’s really what they are called!), when, mid-lunge, I felt that familiar twinge and tightness in my lower back. As I eased out of the stretch, I cursed myself for not being more careful but quickly caught myself and realized that I hadn’t done anything wrong. The blame neural network path is clearly tied to the pain neural network
path. In fact, they might be married. After I caught myself, I quickly switched out of blame and into healing mode. After getting my son off to school, I reviewed and started the McKenzie extension exercises and the wall slides to correct my torso's C shape caused by the muscle spasms. PLEASE NOTE: This is not medical advice, and I am not connected to any of the doctors, therapies, or products that I describe. Rather, I am just sharing the path that has worked for me!

I also started expressive writing...like right that minute. Coincidentally (or maybe not), I have been reading a book called “Back in Control: A Surgeon’s Roadmap Out of Chronic Pain” by Dr. David Hanscom. That’s right, folks. He’s a surgeon. Writing about healing back pain WITHOUT surgery. Basically he’s writing his way out of a job. You know that caught my attention. Some of his ideas and techniques parallel the work of Dr. Sarno that I’ve written about earlier; however, he provides more details on the neural networks formed by pain, anxiety, and anger. I’ll provide a full book review when I finish, but already, I can whole-heartedly recommend this book to those with pain. So, I’m writing, expressively, and doing the McKenzie exercises on the hour, every hour, and I’m feeling better. I added Biotics Intenzyme Forte proteolytic enzymes as soon as I remembered them. These all-natural enzymes, when taken on an empty stomach, “eat” the inflammation, facilitate the healing process, and help you to feel better. I also did more research and found a recommendation from Dr. Axe for back issues...specifically disc issues. I trusted his recommendations because he had used him to recover from his own disc bulge/herniation and he’s lifting and working out like never before. His recommendations included:

1. Eat collagen and broth (CHECK-I’m already doing it but now it’s broth with breakfast, broth with lunch, and broth with dinner, and don’t forget the yummy broth snacks).

2. Take supplements, specifically Omega 3s, MSM, glucosamine/chondroitin, and turmeric and other anti-inflammatory herbs (I had fallen out of rhythm with my Omega 3s, so I added them back in to start).
3. Practice Egoscue. This is a form or posture training that I was unfamiliar with. I watched some YouTube videos (the source for all answers next to the google!) and found a practitioner about an hour away. Then, I found out it would cost around $4000 for a series of instructions. Yikes! I had been practicing the Gokhale method) http://gokhalemethod.com), but it had fallen away when my pain improved last year. So, I’ll be doing stretch-sitting and stretch-lying again, and I signed myself up for a free online workshop to refresh my good posture skills.

4. Prolotherapy. This one was new. Prolo-what? After some (okay, a lot) of research I discovered that prolotherapy and its cousin PRP (platelet-rich plasma) injections don’t just mitigate the symptoms, they actually treat the PROBLEM. What a concept! The idea is that a herniated disc leads to lax ligaments, and low back pain comes from muscle spasms that are overworked because they are trying to pick up the slack (pun intended!) of the lax ligaments. Another theory is that lax ligaments lead to a herniation...it’s a chicken or the egg scenario. Dr. Axe recommended Regenexx prolotherapy and PRP. After calling around to find some practitioners, I found Dr. Wagner at National Spine and Pain Centers. I was shocked to get an appointment with him the following week. What was even more surprising was that he took a lot of time to review my imaging and subsequently spent about 45 minutes with me explaining that I had a herniated disc at L5/S1 on the left side. My face went blank. I explained that the orthopedic doc in Maryland last year said I didn’t have a herniation and that the bulge that I had was on my right side. Meaning that there was no physiological reason for my pain. Meaning that I spent a year stupefied and researching and trying treatments ($$$) when there was an actual physiological connection. In fact. Dr. Wagner told me that my case was “textbook,” and that the disc herniation resolves in six to eight months (it did) and asked if I have had SI joint/piriformis issues (I did). He then told me that indeed, I did NOT have SI joint/piriformis syndrome. Ummm...hold up. I had had yoga therapy, acupuncture, physical therapy, chiropractic, and have done more stretches than I can remember for those two issues, and you are telling me that I don’t have those issues?? Yes, that was what he was telling me! He said that those
diagnoses are often because the provider doesn’t know what is wrong. He told me that he could give me standard treatment like cortisone injections to cool the inflammation and make me feel temporarily better but that I would be back in a few months with the same issues. He drew a giant picture of my back and the ligaments and the treatments and the treatment options and said that if it were him, he would do prolotherapy for the ligament laxity and PRP to regenerate the disc tissue because these are permanent solutions. Are they a 100% cure? No, but nothing is. I left in awe, shock, and frustration. And I proceeded to do more research on prolotherapy (here, here, and here) and PRP (here, here, and here). The findings were positive and promising. The downside was that my insurance won’t cover the cost, but given what I had already spent on treatments that didn’t really TREAT the cause, I decided to go for it. Dr. Wagner and his assistant said that they were surprised to see me without the intermediate traditional injections. I told them I didn’t like the negative effects of steroids and wanted a solution not a band aid. The lab tech drew what felt like a whole lotta blood and sent me off to return in three hours after the blood was spun and frozen (maybe not in that order) to collect the energy-rich platelets. Now, I’m not going to lie. The injections were not comfortable, but in the grand scheme of things, it was tolerable. I’m 24 hours post-procedure and outside of a little soreness at the injection sites, I’m feeling fine. The platelets work over the course of weeks and another round is required in a month or so. I’m doing lots of visualizations seeing those platelets regenerate and strengthen the disc!

5. Corrective chiropractic. I’ve seen a chiropractor (3 different ones to be exact), so initially I dismissed this suggestion, but when I returned to read more about it, I discovered that corrective chiropractic is actually very different than the more traditional chiropractic I had been exposed to. Corrective chiropractic identifies and treats the underlying issues (are you seeing the same theme that I am here?). I found only one chiropractor who practices this method in the driving area. After three initial sessions, I decided to try it. X-rays (which had shockingly never been taken of my spine) revealed that my neck was straight where it should be curved and the same was true for my back. I was shocked. I lead a healthy
lifestyle...how could this happen? Genes and habits were the answer I received back. The treatment plan is intense...three sessions of adjustments and traction a week followed along with at-home exercises performed daily. Will I have time to sleep? Maybe not, but if these changes can take place in three months and set me up for a pain-free, mobile existence with mere tune-ups along the way, it just might be worth it. I'll detail my experience as it progresses.

So, thanks to Dr. Axe and Dr. Wagner, I'm progressing down a new path. A continuation of my healing journey. This is also a reminder that I and you have to be our own health advocates. Ask for second opinions...maybe even a third. No one cares about your health as much as you do. ALWAYS.

Even though I've found some promising physical treatments, I am still committed to gratitude journaling and expressive writing. More details to come on both of those. I'll also keep up with my regular exercise (hopefully more walking with sub-freezing temperatures out of the forecast for the immediate future), meditation, Foundation exercises, and practice of having fun!


Knowledge is power, and implementing that knowledge takes guidance. I've created a resource to walk you though my simple, top lifestyle upgrades to feel better in body, mind, and spirit. I'm also available for consultations to help you tailor this powerful information to your current situation.

You are in control of your health.

BOOK A CONSULTATION