

## EPILOGUE

I have never in my life envied a human being who led an easy life. I have envied a great many people who led difficult lives and led them well.

—Theodore Roosevelt

Bad things happen to good people all the time. Pain is an unavoidable and inevitable condition of life. If we love others, we will experience pain. If we have hopes and dreams, we will experience pain. As we age, we will experience pain. As we encounter accidents, disease, illness, and injury, we are going to experience pain. Given that we are going to have pain throughout our lives, it seems we have made a huge mistake by not educating people about how the brain produces pain, the value of pain, and how to manage pain so it does not end up controlling our lives.

This book not only provided you with a framework for understanding physical pain but gave you the tools you need to face discomfort, pain, and problems in every area of your life. Think of pain as a classroom instructor who uses a powerful megaphone and yells at us to pay attention. There is a lesson for us to learn in every chapter of our lives. Nothing that happens—good or bad, happy or sad—needs to be wasted in our lives. Those who grow the most and have the most to teach us have gone through the hardest experiences in life and are worthy of our attention and respect.

If you are a chronic pain sufferer, you are one of these people. You have a story to tell and a lesson to teach. The difficult events that have happened in your life have helped you to become a person who is stronger, better, wiser, and kinder. Some of these character changes may have never come about without the difficult challenges that you have experienced and are going through now. You are a remarkable person. Never forget that. You may feel that you do not have much to offer because of your physical or financial condition, but it is not how much you have that matters. What matters is what you do with what you have—your life will leave a mark on those around you. Leave a good one by pouring hope into the lives of those you love.

## Patient Testimony

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As noted in the disclaimer, the three main characters of the book are not real patients. You might wonder if there are real people who make the kind of life changes that are described here. The following is a firsthand account of a former member of the U.S. Special Forces who tried every imaginable treatment for chronic pain without finding relief, just like the characters portrayed in this book. Here is his story in his own words.

## Revolving Door

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*After a minimum of twenty-four physical therapy programs that included traction, aqua-therapy and Rolfing (some lasting four months), multiple chiropractors, acupuncture, prolotherapy, multiple osteopathic manipulations, special back braces, a plethora of pain creams, gel ice packs, heating pads, a lot of massages, a smorgasbord of non-steroidal anti-inflammatories, high doses of oral steroids, over forty-eight corticosteroid spinal injections, twenty-four spinal nerve blocks, six spinal nerve root rhizotomies, three lumbar surgeries, and a full menu of opioids and benzodiazepines, the low back pain was worse than it had ever been. I saw dozens of doctors, including neurosurgeons, orthopedic surgeons, anesthesiologists, and physiatrists. Full workups were accomplished at the Mayo Clinic in Jacksonville and twice at the Cleveland Clinic. At best, my medical diagnosis—or lack thereof—fell through the cracks of modern medicine. Unable to perform my duties as an AC-130 gunship special operations pilot in the United States Air Force, I was medically retired after twenty-six years.*

## The Transition

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*It seems like I was created just for flying airplanes. I was very good at what I did, and being invincible, there was nothing too difficult for me. I struggled with pain in between missions, but the pain could be managed with healthy doses of ibuprofen and alcohol. It's not as if these social modalities stood out on their own. After flying all night in the supposed cover of darkness, dodging bullets and missiles, it seemed normal to drink myself to sleep. Eventually, my invincibility slowly deteriorated. The downtime from flying missions due to*

*medical intervention became too great. Finally, when the third lumbar surgery made pain conditions unbearable, it was time to face reality. As I was sitting in the chief flight surgeon's office discussing my medical situation, it hit me when he said, "Just how much longer do you think that you want to do this?" It felt like he just slapped me in the head with a brick! Superman does not take kindly to defeat.*

## **The Perfect Storm**

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*I was out of a job and unable to work. My income and, more importantly, my identity had been taken away. We moved twice in two years. I had an undiagnosed infection that caused high fevers, uncontrollable shaking, and confusion. Twice, I was hospitalized for septicemia. Out for a walk, I tripped on a trail in the woods and suffered a severe concussion that caused constant headaches and memory problems. To top it off, my perfect job left me suffering from combat-induced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). All the while, I was ingesting 480 mg of morphine and 40 mg of clonazepam daily for pain and anxiety.*

*I was surprised I was still alive but not necessarily thankful. I was surprised I was still married but not too concerned. If you see your life swirling around the outside edge of a funnel right before it sinks through the center, you are not too concerned with the details!*

## **Here We Go Again**

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*I eventually enrolled at Mary Free Bed Rehabilitation Hospital in the pain center. In the back of my head, I knew this was probably my last chance, the end of the road. As I read through the program packet, my eyes fixated on one of the program goals. The plan involved ridding patients of all or most of their pain medication. I focused on the word "most."*

*The 480 mg of morphine and 40 mg of clonazepam were not working anymore. Prior to this program, I purposely coordinated with my physician to draw down from all medications. I weaned myself down to 30 mg of hydrocodone one month before starting the program and remained at that level through the formal program. For three months, withdrawal symptoms were horrible. Postconcussive symptoms seemed to magnify the withdrawal. I slept*

*for two to three hours a night. Every sixth day, I slept in for a total of four hours. My nervous system felt like it was being shredded. For the first month, I remember cursing Mary Free Bed at home.*

## **You Get What You Give**

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*Military pilots maintain an interesting relationship with their primary care physicians, who are flight surgeons. A flight surgeon can ground a pilot at any time for anything. I learned to talk around some of my issues to keep from getting grounded. A negative behavior pattern I developed was to selectively share information with medical providers. That had proven to be a bad healthcare formula, so I decided instead to be truthful with my healthcare team when I arrived at the Mary Free Bed pain rehabilitation program.*

*I'll gladly take credit for one thing in this program—I showed up and attended!*

*I found it extremely important to trust my team and comply with their directions. I implemented every suggestion and homework assignment into daily life as if there was no other choice. My twenty-five-year record of failure in this area dictated program compliance.*

*What I would normally label “a bunch of crap” helped me lessen withdrawal symptoms and pain. My pain psychologist taught me invaluable lessons in relaxation and mindfulness. I continued to practice the exercises even when I thought they wouldn't help. My medical provider prescribed short-term meds to ease symptoms and, more importantly, listened to me without judgment. It had been a while since someone knowledgeable trusted what I had to say and helped me work through physical issues. My occupational therapist taught me several techniques for enhancing sleep and relaxation. My physical therapist was a master of helping me understand how to best move through life within my circumstances.*

## **Moving Forward with Life**

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*After graduating from the pain rehabilitation program, I made several follow-up appointments with my pain psychologist, medical provider, nurse, and physical therapist, because that is what I needed to succeed.*

*Today, I do not use opioids or benzodiazepines (anxiety medication)!*

*I encountered several new setbacks while enrolled in the program. The muddy waters, created by all the medication, began to clear up and reveal other physical and emotional problems. Both my hips and one knee were surgically repaired. Six teeth were extracted for infection, and an extensive oral surgery session paved the way for future dental implants. The oral bone grafts required that I quit smoking. After forty years of using nicotine, I used mindfulness exercises to quit without looking back.*

*Some very negative behavior patterns from my PTSD developed due to long-term exposure to significant physical and emotional events. These negative behavior patterns resulted in significant relationship problems. Without relationships, the soul crumbles. My pain psychologist guided me through the release of emotional pain and paranoia associated with traumatic memories.*

*My very patient wife and I have been married thirty-six years. Prior to this program, I knew our relationship was severely strained, but I was mentally unequipped to effect any positive change.*

*Today, our marriage is like the adventuresome experience we had dating in high school, enjoying the moment, not sweating the small stuff.*

*I now sleep for five to seven hours a night!*

*Instead of pain medication, I use the toolbox given to me by my healthcare team at Mary Free Bed every day.*

*Today, I'm not mad at anyone or anything. I'm certainly more compassionate for those experiencing some type of duress. Most importantly, at the beginning of each day, I become excited at the prospect of making someone laugh!*

## **What is Your Story?**

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After reading this short account of one person's journey from being stuck in chronic pain to moving forward with life, maybe you would like to share your own story of how you are able to manage pain. You can share your story by going to my website, [PainRehabSource.com](http://PainRehabSource.com), and clicking on the link to submit your story. Your story will then be featured on the website and then serve as an encouragement to others. I am looking forward to hearing from you!