

“APPOINTMENTS WITH PAIN”

By Carri Taylor

How do you define pain? Please take a few moments before you read further to think about that.

Funk & Wagnall’s definition of pain:

The sensation or feeling resulting from or accompanying some injury, derangement, overstrain, or obstruction of the physical powers: any distressing or afflicting emotion, or such emotions in general: grief. Pain is a disturbing sensation from which nature revolts, resulting from some injurious external interference (wound, bruise, harsh word). Ache - lingering pain. Pang – short, sharp, intense and perhaps repeated. Throe – a violent pain. Paroxysm – alternately recurring and receding, comes in waves. Torment and Torture – intense and terrible sufferings. Compare: adversity, affliction, agony, injury, and suffering.

To me, the above categories of pain can apply to emotional as well as physical pain. We can have a lingering emotional pain; a sharp, intense and repeated emotional pain; a violent emotional pain; an emotional pain that comes in waves; and a terribly intense emotional pain.

Please take another few moments to answer these questions.

What do you do when you are confronted with physical pain? What do you do when emotional pain shows up in your life? After determining how you respond to both kinds of pain, how well are your coping mechanisms working?

If someone could take away your ability to feel pain (physical and/or emotional), would you accept the offer? I think at first thought, most of us would say “yes.” This is usually the answer I get when I ask audiences. What would happen if you didn’t feel physical pain? As people think about that a bit more, the realization hits that pain actually warns us of trouble. Physical pain sends us to the doctor – sooner or later. I know there are types that push the “over-ride” button and respond very stoically. There are also those that have a low tolerance and run for help immediately. I think there is another type that talks a lot about it, but does nothing. And there is the type that determines to get it checked out and deal with it so they can move on. What is your response?

Emotional pain is also a warning that something inside needs care and attention. Revisiting your answer to my initial questions, what do you do when emotional pain hits? Ignore it, run around it, deny it, laugh it off, spiritualize it, drown in it, or obsess with it? I’m sure I’ve missed a few options or alternatives. What I find interesting is, most of us develop coping mechanisms that seem to work temporarily (when we settle for a quick fix), and then we find the pain/problem recycling because it wasn’t thoroughly dealt with for long-term resolution.

During one of the most painful seasons of my life, my counselor had the gall to suggest that I was trying too hard to get rid of my emotional pain and the real cure would be to “go with it.” At the time that seemed like the most ridiculous thing anyone could say to me when I thought I was drowning – except – this was a man I highly respected, valued and who had seen the emotional crash of my life coming five years before it happened. He saw the part of me I wasn’t even aware of and may have been unconsciously ignoring or rationalizing away.

If your attempts are not accomplishing the desired result of resolving the pain and initiate healing, you may find peace in handling pain differently. After all, the best definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over while expecting different results.

What does it mean to “go with it?” The shortest route through pain is heading right into it. Like surgery. If something needs to come out of my body, the sooner it is eliminated, the better off I’ll be. Surgery can be frightening, painful, and the recovery period may take some time. When properly handled, I am able to live free of the problem.

After I recovered from the previously mentioned painful season of my life - which happened to be my divorce - since I was in the film industry, I produced a two-part series on ‘marriage, divorce and remarriage.’ It is entitled “Pieces to Peace.” The first film is “Breaking Points” and the second, “New Beginnings.” Even though the series has been in circulation for two decades, the content remains current today. In “Breaking Points” there is a section on pain. Here are some of the comments of the people I interviewed (including myself) in being confronted with pain and finding their way through it.

Terry:

“I want to understand why they did what they what they did. I want to understand what they did to me. Why? What do I really want? I want a little piece of paper to hang on my wall that’s a guarantee this will never happen again. But the truth is, understanding what they did to me will not lead me to healing and recovery. It’s not the circumstances that need to recover, it’s me.”

Paul:

“Something’s I understand, and something’s are still painful and confusing and disappointing. And I find my mind spinning sometimes, like I’m rehearsing the tapes over and over again. And I can’t turn it off. And I just wish as I’m doing that, that the tapes would either erase or just self-destruct.”

Dr. Gordon Hess:

“One of the ways people deal with pain is to spiritualize it – to rise above it as though it could not affect them. Another way of dealing with pain is to repress it or to deny it - to push it down or to ignore it. Another way of dealing with pain is to try to run around it, to escape it, to avoid it. The healthiest way, however, is to just go straight through it, to admit that we’re human and that we hurt.”

Paul:

“I really believe that going through the pain is your ticket to mental health. It’s your bridge away from the crash scene.”

Lynn:

“I realize that there’s no rushing this healing process. I have to move through it, not around it. And if I don’t deal with it now, I’m going to have to deal with it later.”

Dr. Gordon Hess:

“Pain need not be our enemy it really can be our friend. It always pushes us to places we would never go if we were comfortable.”

Carri:

“Pain is a teacher. And if you don’t walk right through it and experience it, you’re short-circuiting what God wants to do with your life through the pain.”

Dr. Gordon Hess:

“Pain always has a backside of blessing. You don’t see it until you’ve gotten all the way through it.”

Sharon:

“When I’m hurting, the last thing I need is a simple formula, platitudes, a quick response. I need flesh, heart, and a listening ear. Someone to be there for me and to even let me ramble.”

Terry:

“We think asking for help is a sign of weakness, we’ll nothing could be further from the truth. As a matter of fact, had it not been for the help of some significant friends in my life, I wouldn’t even be here today. They said, “Terry, you may go down, but we’re going down with you.”

Janet:

“I wasted two years trying to understand why. Then a release came for me when I changed my ‘Why, God?’ to ‘Where do we go from here, God, and how do we get there?’”

After producing “Pieces to Peace,” I had a chance to use this information in my own life in a new way. This time, what my counselor had said to me a number of years earlier took on real meaning. I was engaged to be married and there were some issues that I believed needed to be resolved before the Wedding took place. I had worked hard getting to know myself, determining my goals and purpose for being on the planet, and the dynamics (non-negotiables) that would be important to have in a committed relationship.

In my mind, two dynamics were not coming together in this relationship, so less than two weeks before the Wedding was to take place, I talked with my fiancé and upon my insistence we called the Wedding off. After finding his way through the shock and disappointment of my decision, he offered to cooperate in writing a letter with me to all the guests explaining the decision, as well as make phone calls to them. Even though this was initially my decision and I had no peace proceeding, I was still broken-hearted and disappointed that I wouldn’t be getting married. So, what was I going to do with the pain? I decided to “go with it” and really try on a new way of coping.

In my bedroom there was a mirrored wardrobe sliding door. Every night when I went to bed I would turn toward the mirror, look at myself, cry, talk, yell, and pray, until I was ready to go to sleep. In the morning I did the same thing – turned toward the mirror, cried, talked, yelled, prayed, and then got ready to take my daughter to school and go to the office. If during the day the pain would creep up on me and begin to overwhelm me, I scheduled 10 to 15 minutes with myself to “go with it” or head into it. When that time was up I would go back to the tasks of the day. Sometimes I realized the next “appointment” might have to be longer than the 10 to 15 minutes, but just knowing I would attend to the wound allowed me the freedom to get on with life.

I was amazed! By the end of the first week my “mirror” conversations were changing. I had definitely unearthed that I was blaming him for not being what I wanted him to be and had expected of him. I started realizing that it wasn’t his fault; it was mine! He was who he was and had every right to determine that. If I was uncomfortable with any part of that, or believed it would cause serious issues in our relationship; that was my responsibility to handle. I had a choice to be or not to be with this person. It was not my right to change him or demand things from him that would fit what I wanted him to be for me.

By the end of the second week of my “mirror” conversations, I was in a whole new place. I was still sad and disappointed, but I was back into my life in full swing with hope about the future. It was pretty clear to me that I had personal work to do, which I did within myself, with God and with professional help.

The bottom line was, I realized I kept falling for the same man in a different package. Some of the characteristics in these men were not necessarily good for me. I did the work of regrouping, revisiting what seemed to be attractive to me, what I really wanted and where I was headed in my life. This changed who and how I dated.

Another very painful time for me was when my daughter at 16 decided to “take off” because I wasn’t giving her what she wanted. It was really a lot deeper than that because she’d gone through the divorce of her parents, had been with me as a single divorced parent for 4 1/2 years, and then in a stepfamily for two years. She was in a lot of pain and unable or unwilling to use healthy coping methods. (That’s an article for her to write.)

When she “took off,” at first I didn’t know where she was. Eventually I found out and after some extremely painful encounters, she ended up with her father and proceeded to hit bottom. The pain was great and overwhelming. I was helpless and at that time she wanted nothing to do with me. So, I went for it – the pain, that is. I would go into her room, sit, cry, smell her things, talk to God, and have my “appointments.” My new husband was very supportive. He has since said that he learned a lot just watching me. Again, in about two weeks I was in another place. I was still very sad and disappointed, but my life was back in full swing and I was able to see a new view of the situation. She was now in God’s hands. I even began joking about it by saying that I had been violently thrown into the “empty nest” syndrome.

During her absence God was working in me and in her – not the way I would have wanted or ever expected, but in His way. She did request to return home and we all (the all included her Stepfather) determined to commit to a more responsible and skillful way of being together. The road wasn’t easy and the pain wasn’t gone, but I can say 14 years later that the new bridges we were building then with one another and continue to build; have proven to be very strong.

When we are wounded physically we bleed – this cleanses the wound. An appointment to cry may be a way to bleed emotionally and begin cleansing the wound. The chemistry of tears is very different than when our eyes water.

One way I’ve always known I’m healing is when I start to laugh about the situation a bit. I’m not talking about making light of things in our life and using humor to avoid the pain. I’m talking about the kind of humor that comes only after I’m clear with myself and with the other who I believe has been the focus of the pain.

What happens when we don’t head into the pain? I believe the tentacles of the pain will reach into every area of our lives and invade our attitudes without conscious awareness. Some times we may even be aware that the pain is seething inside and may not know what to do with it. The first knee-jerk reaction is usually to blame others, the situation or event; and justify our own behavior. That’s a sure formula for staying stuck and encouraging rot in our own frame of reference towards others, life, and interestingly enough – ourselves.

What I’ve addressed so far is how to handle the pain when it has already hit. What about managing myself when I’m getting shot at? That takes a new world-view of pain and it takes learning new communication and conflict resolution skills. A new world-view involves changing my mind about the

pain. It involves a willingness to grow through and learn from the pain. New skills allow me to implement and exercise my new frame of mind regarding pain.

Pain management skills are paradoxical. Usually the very thing I want to do in the situation is the last thing that will take me through it with grace. The best news is: you can learn new skills. I'm grateful for the skills I've learned and now teach. Not only have communication skills helped me get in touch with myself at a much deeper and fuller level, they've allowed me to traverse the barriers into another person's life.

I'm ever amazed at how possible and effective being a skillful communicator can be – especially in the face of emotional “terror” coming at me. Underneath anger are softer, primary emotions such as: sadness, fear and disappointment. Listening for those emotions in myself and in others, allows me to see broader and deeper. It allows me to touch the pain inside of the other and inside of me, instead of building higher, thicker walls between us. Those walls may serve the purpose of seemingly protecting myself by keeping someone out. They will also wall in my own emotional poison.

After a recent painful encounter with a family member, this is what I wrote to myself.

What have I learned? I can't fight resistance, nor change someone's mind. Many times the way to a win is being willing to live with a loss. God is in charge no matter how it looks from my point of view. Most (probably all) of us are coming from pain (hurts, losses, disappointments, perceived or real threats) our goal is to protect ourselves from further harm. Christ modeled to us how to respond. He never defended Himself – who has to if God is for us? He knew who and whose He was, He knew His mission, He forgave shortsighted people and loved them anyway. So what is my job? To be sure my behavior and intentions are in line with God's – even though I'm humanly struggling in the moment. I won't hear their pain unless I LISTEN to understand. That means listening beyond the words; listening beyond the anger to the fear, sadness and/or disappointment; listen to see how they see me whether I see myself like that or not. I can be aware and know that my own pain from the past, and that is being created in the encounter of the moment (attack, onslaught, surprise, whatever) will cloud my vision and block God from using me to accomplish His will in that particular setting. Going through the pain makes me stronger, enlarges my vision, and draws me closer to God's heart.

After working with a client through a difficult encounter with one of her friends, I wrote this to her, which she said she will be keeping close at hand. It was not meant to be profound, but if it sheds light and encourages you, here it is:

Hang in there with the communication skills - I believe using them is a wonderful way to live life. It will always be like walking a tight rope wanting to balance between healthy boundaries (valuing myself) and graciously considering and acting on the wants of others (valuing them). Then the wisdom comes from discerning ill intentions and knowing when to beef up the boundaries and when to allow them to be more permeable. That's where the Holy Spirit can direct us.

In conclusion: ***pain is a sign of life, the road marker to direct our path.*** Heading into it has been the fastest way to healing for me. Embracing it into my life has allowed me to grow with it and enlarge my understanding of God, the world and myself.