



LISTENING TO THE MIND TO HEAL THE BODY

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I have spent the better part of my life making a study of pain. This began out of necessity, at age 19 when I was delivered a life sentence in the form of a spinal condition known as Spondylolisthesis. The day I received the news, I was flat on my back in an orthopedic surgeon's office, Xray slapped on the lit screen, panicked and in agony. My diagnosis was fraught with warning: no long travel, no active sports, beware certain sleeping positions, and the most emphatic: the likelihood of carrying a baby to term without serious injury was small to none. Having been a child who'd swaddled her baby dolls and stuffed animals with equal passion and purpose, this final piece of news hit me hard. A life without the big and vibrant family I had envisioned? Was this a life at all?

The spinal fusion surgery the doctors were recommending could wait they said - I was young and if I was very careful and followed their complex instructions, I might live until 40 without it. Even so, the reality lingered in my thoughts: a body cast, a long recovery, a limited life.

A contemplative soul by nature often pondering life's secrets and complexity, I knew inherently that perhaps this wouldn't be my fate. I didn't at the time, however, know quite why, or how. A psychology student and a curious being, I opened myself to the possibility that there was more than one reason human beings experienced pain. Exposed to Dr. John Sarno's theories of Mind/Body medicine, I made a bold gesture: I would do a psychology experiment, on myself.

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Sarno's theories posited that we live in a mind/body system. Although we may look damaged on Xray or MRI, these abnormalities are part of being alive, and do not account for the surge of chronic pain cases in our society. Instead, he espoused, repressed emotions are the root of human pain. To heal, we must consider not only our physical selves, but our emotional ones as well. We must boldly draw back the curtains of our lives, and peek within. We must walk into our darkest rooms, and turn on the light.

Following Sarno's instructions, I dedicated myself to the excavation of my subconscious. Although a frightening concept at first glance, I embraced its necessity with appropriate desperation and surrender. If, as I contend, life is a choice between "what hurts" and "what hurts worse," this journaling exercise was certainly a better option than a limited life of chronic pain and potentially catastrophic surgery.

In my efforts over the following months, I came to know myself on another level. I looked at a child who didn't feel heard; a life driven by fear and shame and overblown expectations which were, as William Shakespeare so aptly put it, "The root of all heartache." I sat with the sadness, the anger, the resignation and the grief. I sat, with patience and kindness for myself, and finally arose from the effort pain-free. Although still broken via MRI, I have traveled the world, surfed, skied and rollerbladed my way from one year to the next, and slept any way I've well pleased. My beautiful babies, Isabella, Oliver and Charlotte are 14, 12 and 9. I carried them to term, exercising until the day each was born. I am 44 years old and have never had a surgery.

As a psychotherapist who's dedicated my private practice for years solely to the cure of chronic pain as I experienced myself, I have learned that in order to broach the pandemic of chronic illness we must first consider a most important query: Where does pain live? Is pain in our bodies? When we suffer from Irritable Bowel Disease, does it exist in within the stomach? Is fibromyalgia located in the nerves that run up and down our arms and legs - does pain live there? Do

muscle groups, as they ache and spasm, carry the pain within them, isolated? How about the pain of the heart... where does that live? Do we not ache from loss in our physical bodies, our stomachs sick with the receipt of bad news, our skin awash with hives upon certain panic? We certainly *feel* pain in our bodies, but as modern medicine has shown us through the uncertain results of surgery and the epic disaster of opiate pain medications, perhaps we must search further for relief.

I have come to know with confidence through years of watching the most severe pain conditions resolve completely, that we have the power to rid ourselves of the symptoms associated with many and varied diagnoses through properly guided introspection, and simple unearthing of the matters in our lives which have been repressed out of necessity. There is no need to actually resolve any issue one is experiencing. It needs only to be genuinely *known*.

In order for you to embrace the concept of mind/body healing in full, allow me to explain how and why we channel emotional pain into physical suffering. Each of us has certain *givens* that we are taught from birth, by both our families and by society at large. We are taught to be good. We are taught to be polite. We are taught to "suck it up," and be the person, or friend, or parent, or partner we are supposed to be. And we learn. *You* learn. You pride yourself on being a good person – pulling your weight, being fair, letting things go, having patience. Right? That's you. Or maybe on your best day that's you.

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The problem with this very expected societal given is that you may not allow yourself to feel what is a very normal response to whatever difficult situation you have going on in your life, or your upsetting or conflictual memories from childhood, or your own inner critic created long ago who sits in constant judgment of your behavior. Emotionally, you don't feel patient, or kind, or understanding, or loving. You don't want to "let it go." Inside, you are only 5-years-old. Think about a 5-year-old you know. She has no interest in being polite, or thoughtful, or humble when she is upset. She just wants to scream until she gets what she wants. She wants you to know exactly how she thinks and feels, and she is certain that she is right.

The problem here is that you are not actually 5-years-old, and that tantruming part of your mind is very inconvenient to the effort of getting through your day, being kind to your family and friends, and managing your life.

So, you have a reflex. It's as natural a reflex as your leg popping up when the doctor taps your knee.

Without any conscious effort on your part, you push down feelings of anger or resentment because you know those feelings aren't "nice." They aren't acceptable. The moment you even



begin to feel them, you become stressed, and your mind is in motion explaining to you all the reasons that thinking these dark thoughts will get you nowhere. So, you push them away. You shove them down.

Here's what happens: These unfelt emotions build up, and the feelings reach critical mass, and finally refuse to be held down anymore. They start to rise to your consciousness, and threaten to inform you exactly how angry you are, or sad you feel, or ashamed you are.

Your brain says, "No! That's not acceptable to feel those dark things. It does not assist in your survival!"

Remember, in some ways our brains are still primitive, operating in the same fight or flight techniques since the dawn of man. If the brain does not find something adaptive or imperative, it will do its best to protect us. Although feelings are actually safe to feel when given a voice in an appropriate manner, our minds do not understand this as of yet. When these feelings of anger, sadness, shame, embarrassment, regret, and fear threaten to rise into our conscious thoughts, the brain's reaction is the same as if it is telling you to run from a woolly mammoth. You see, it thinks it is protecting you.

As the brain has this reaction in your subconscious, some place in your body seizes up, knots up, cramps up. Just like the headache you get when you're stressed out, or the stomach ache you get when you're about to give a big speech, or the hives you break into when you're on the spot, your body is responding to frustration - a bigger frustration than you can even conceive at the moment. The pain appears somewhere in your body, and all of a sudden... The brain has done its job. It's distracted you from the thoughts or feelings you didn't want to have. They are naturally pushed back down as you have more important things to attend to, like making doctor's appointments, researching alternative treatments, picking up medication, and fearing surgery.

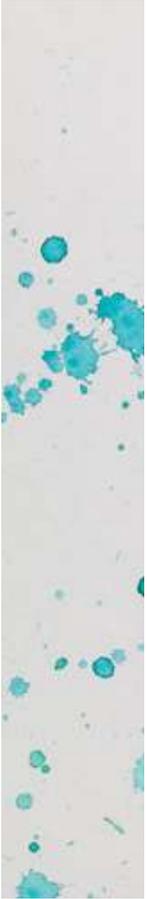
So now, you are "safe." You are back in the driver's seat. You cancel your plans because you're too uncomfortable to join the group. You lament tearfully to friends and family over the limits of your life. Although you can't possibly know this at the moment, your system has calmed down amidst this unfortunate existence, and feels more comfortable keeping you right there.

The first law of thermodynamics, also known as *Law of Conservation of Energy*, states that energy can neither be created nor destroyed; energy can only be transferred or changed from one

form to another. In my work, I like to apply this law to our mind/body systems. When we are spending a portion of our energy (often a large portion) holding down these feelings which our brains deem unacceptable, we have little room for anything else. From the time we wake in the morning to the moment we retire at night, we have a finite amount of energy available to us. We can use it in many ways. When we are engaged in this struggle to not feel our feelings, however subconscious, we rob ourselves of the beautiful energy required to embrace our lives, and the joy which is our birthright as human beings. Also, often, we live in terrible pain.



The process of recognizing and listening to our emotions gives a steam valve to this entire system, allowing feelings to safely evaporate into the air. Even though one might worry at first that feeling potentially dark things about people and events in one's life will hurt "worse," it is strikingly the opposite. Patients consistently report, alongside pain elimination, feeling unburdened, lighter, and more at peace. Their relationships shift, as releasing repressed anger, fear and shame often renders conflict powerless. Also, and in my experience the most joyful result, once true feelings about a person or event are unearthed and examined, the whole situation transforms. My most painful wound, revealed during a tearful journaling session, turned out to be about me, not the other person. The relief was palpable. If I was actually angry at myself, that was something I had the power to change. Through patient introspection and contemplative practice, I was able to see how I had carried perfectionism like a shield, and gently put it down.



The process by which I teach people to heal is called *JournalSpeak*. In short, *JournalSpeak* is a language we must learn in order to give our very natural human emotions a voice. Most importantly, I teach that no one needs to hear this voice but you. There is no confrontation necessary, or change of situation imperative to heal. Since the pain is only necessitated by the repression of emotions, failure to repress disempowers the pain response completely. And this is good news, because *JournalSpeak* is not nice, or kind, or acceptable. It's the 5-year-old having a breakdown, it's winning every argument in which you've ever engaged, it's telling your loved ones off in a fashion so epic it would not be mended easily. Yet, no harm comes to anyone. *JournalSpeak* lives only in your private journal or document, and once it is spoken, it can be discarded immediately. There is no need to ever re-read this journal; this is not the kind of memory which begs a leather-bound keepsake. *JournalSpeak* is simply a *vehicle* to peace and well-being. It is a life raft which brings you to shore.

Polite society is the world we live in, and there is nothing wrong with that. But the internal dialogue that is happening within us can paralyze us without an outlet. I often present the query to my clients: "If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?" I ask this to awaken them to the reality that even if we don't acknowledge our repressed emotions, they will surface somewhere. Sometimes this is in the form of physical suffering, and sometimes it's simply a feeling of being stuck, as if the world is for everyone else, and not for us. It makes a sound; it crashes with passion in each falling. You have a choice whether or not to pay attention to it, but either way it will resonate. When we have inconvenient feelings and very natural reactions to our lives, they make a sound within our mind/body systems. When we fail to listen and give them a moment of our attention, they build up in strength and eventually can cripple us in pain. Learning *JournalSpeak* and applying it to one's life is the antidote to the damage of this falling tree. It allows you to safely hear the sound it is making, giving it a steam valve and releasing the need for your brain to protect you with physical pain. Hard to believe perhaps, but true.

From wheelchair bound, to playing 18 holes of golf. From hospitalization and hopelessness, to a life without limit. Common people are doing the uncommon every day in my practice, and in their lives. Pain is the great leveler - when we hurt, we hurt the same. It creates a situation, for a moment, when we are exactly alike, no matter our story. The mother grieving over the death of her child in a Syrian refugee camp, and the mother grieving over the death of her child in the best Manhattan hospital, feel the same pain in that moment. The man who cannot leave his bed as his back is in agony, is the same man whether he lives in a penthouse or public housing. We are human beings, animals in nature, and when we suffer, we suffer the same.

Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this *Bulletin*), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

Pain has great power. It has greater power than any other force, because when we are in acute enough pain, we can literally do nothing else. It grabs our attention first, before anything joyful before us; before anything that would allow us to relax and be present. Through the simple witnessing of our own conflict and beliefs, the world opens to us; a life of consciousness is within our grasp. The path, formerly littered with branches and obstacles, is rather a passage of curiosity and hope.

As for me, I am overwhelmed daily with gratitude for my pain, my journey, and the bounty of my life as a result. It is my heartfelt wish that those walking this road open their minds, find their willingness born of surrender, and embrace the healing that is possible. As I always say, the life you save is your own.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicole J. Sachs, LCSW is a writer and psychotherapist who has dedicated her work and her practice to the treatment of chronic pain and conditions. She is the author of *The Meaning of Truth*, and the online course: FREEDOM FROM CHRONIC PAIN. Through her personal journey, as well working with hundreds of clients, she's

shaped and evolved theories which serve to teach those suffering how to heal themselves, completely, with no medication or surgery. She lives and works in coastal Delaware with her wife and five beautiful children. Learn more about Nicole's work at www.thecureforchronicpain.com.

