

Suggested Discussion Topics

With Mary Ruth Velicki MS, DPT

Author of *Healing Through Chronic Pain: A Physical Therapist's Personal Journey of Body/Mind/Spirit Transformation*

Healing Through Chronic Pain: Qs & As

Q: What is your book about?

A: In *Healing Through Chronic Pain*, I recount my five-year journey to heal from debilitating pelvic pain (painful bladder syndrome). I was working as a physical therapist and university instructor when the pain pulled me out of my regular life. Determined to get better, I set aside my initial skepticism and tried a plethora of treatments from Western, Eastern, and alternative sides of medicine. To my surprise, I underwent incredible healing that extended beyond my physical body to my full person and experienced many direct connections between my body, mind, and spirit. Much to my surprise, the suffering was actually a gift. Comparing my life and the state of my body, mind, and spirit before my illness to now, I would never want to go back. The journey was rocky, but the rewards were unexpected and amazing.

Q: Who are your readers?

A: This memoir appeals to people who are interested in the healing process and the body/mind/spirit connection. The book has received positive reviews from doctors, therapists and alternative health care providers as well as people suffering from chronic pain. Some of the best book reviews have come from people who do not have physical pain who relate to the deeply human experience of painful challenge and personal transformation.

Q: What makes this memoir valuable or interesting?

A: There are several reasons why this memoir has captured the attention of readers:

- My professional background and healing experiences help to bridge the gap that often exists between clinician and patient.
- In the book, I start out as a skeptical, western-medicine trained physical therapist and end up trying a plethora of treatments from Eastern and alternative sides of medicine. These experiences may expose other clinicians and patients to new viewpoints and treatments.
- This book presents many direct experiences of the body/mind/spirit connection, which may challenge and expand common perceptions of healing.
- For people who are suffering with chronic pain, this book provides inspiration, support and hope.

Q: How can a story about pain be uplifting?

A: This fire of suffering transformed both my internal and external life in amazing and positive ways. In my case, the challenge of chronic pain pushed me look within- not to blame myself for the condition- but to transform underlying trauma, shame and fear into loving self-acceptance. I experienced tremendous post-traumatic growth, and my story is an example of how adversity can become a powerful catalyst for personal healing.

Q: Why did you decide to write this book?

A: At the start of my illness, I began writing a guide on how to physically manage chronic pelvic pain. Having a reason for going through the pain made it easier to endure, and writing was a natural extension of my career as a physical therapist and university instructor. But then this journey became about much more than just relieving my physical pain and writing a book to help others manage their chronic pain.

Over time, I realized that my illness created challenges and changes for my mind and spirit as well as for my body. I came to understand that all three aspects of my person—body, mind, and spirit—are interconnected pieces of this healing puzzle. Taking this holistic approach to my illness ultimately played an integral role in my healing, so I decided to write about all aspects of my experience.

Q: What medical condition caused your chronic pain?

A: My main symptoms were bladder pain and inflammation, pelvic floor dysfunction, and a nervous system in over drive. Many diagnoses have been used to label these symptoms including: interstitial cystitis (IC), painful bladder syndrome (PBS), and chronic pelvic pain syndrome (CPPS). I was also diagnosed with irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) and found out that many people with IC/PBS have additional conditions such as: IBS, fibromyalgia or chronic fatigue syndrome.

Knowing the diagnostic labels for my condition wasn't as helpful as it might have been for illnesses having a well-defined pathology and researched treatments. IC/PBS is poorly understood and often debilitating, and the type and severity of symptoms varies greatly between people and even in each individual over time.

Q: How prevalent is IC/PBS?

A: IC/PBS is widespread and under-diagnosed. It is estimated that 3-8 million women (3-7%) over the age of 18 in the United States have symptoms of IC/PBS. Of these women, only 10% have a diagnosis of IC/PBS, even though the severity and impact of their symptoms is similar to those with an established diagnosis.¹ A recent study shows that the incidence of IC symptoms among men approaches that of women, indicating that the condition may also be under diagnosed in American men.²

1. Berry, S.H., Elliott, M.N., Suttorp, M., et al. (2011). Prevalence of symptoms of bladder pain syndrome/interstitial cystitis among adult females in the United States. *Journal of Urology*, 186(2), 540-544.
2. Suskind, A.M., Berry, S.H., Ewing, B.A., et al. (2013). The prevalence and overlap of interstitial cystitis/bladder pain syndrome and chronic prostatitis/chronic pelvic pain syndrome in men: results of the RAND interstitial cystitis epidemiology male study. *Journal of Urology*, 189(1), 141-145.

Q: How can your book help people in pain?

A: One of the main reasons I wrote this book was to provide connection, support, and hope to others who are dealing with chronic pain- especially those who also have conditions that are complex and multi-faceted like painful bladder syndrome (PBS) and fibromyalgia.

There are several reason why I thought my perspective may be useful:

- My background as a physical therapist and university instructor helped me to look at my condition in an analytical way and to communicate effectively with members of my care team. In the book, I share the personal strategies I adopted to get through the challenge of living for years with chronic pain.
- I tried numerous treatments from Western, Eastern, and alternative sides of medicine, and my experiences may help introduce others to treatment options they had not previously considered.
- I worked with a group of very experienced and skilled professionals. One of the biggest reasons I felt compelled to write this book was to share their helpful wisdom with others who are in pain.
- When I was in the depths of pain and despair, hearing the stories of other people with my condition helped me feel less isolated and lonely, and when I read that they improved over time, I also felt some hope. For me, feelings of connection and hope calmed my body/mind and helped me to heal.

Q: What is the one thing that cured your condition?

A: In my case, healing my chronic pelvic pain was not a simple task. In order to get better I used a combination of methods from Western medicine, Eastern medicine, and alternative treatments that addressed all aspects of my person—body, mind, and spirit. There was no quick fix or cure and the healing happened gradually over time at all levels of my being.

For me, it was important to appreciate that this condition affected many systems in my body (urogenital, musculoskeletal, neurological), and I needed to work on all of them. It was also crucial to be open to the idea that there may be an emotional component to my illness. Over the years I worked hard to uncover beliefs, thought patterns and past trauma that may have contributed to the ramp-up of my nervous system. Once I became conscious of these stressors, I could address them, and this helped to calm down both my body and my mind. Working at the mind and body level simultaneously was crucial for my healing.

Q: How has this experience changed your perspective as a physical therapist?

A: Before my illness, I viewed the body as a machine that would occasionally break down and therapists and doctors as mechanics who hopefully had enough knowledge and skill to fix the problems. Now I see the body as a living, adaptive organism with innate healing mechanisms. This perspective gave me hope when I was in pain because if the body is reactive and malleable, there is possibility for change and healing.

Before my journey through chronic pain, my focus as a physical therapist was almost solely on the body, but now I have directly experienced the body/mind/spirit connection. My work now combines my physical therapy knowledge with complementary treatments that aim to calm the nervous system and promote healing.

Possible Articles/ Media Segments

A Physical Therapist Shares Her Personal Healing from Chronic Pelvic Pain

A Skeptical Physical Therapist Experiences Holistic Healing

A Physical Therapist Provides Support and Inspiration for People with Pelvic Pain

A Physical Therapist's Personal Experiences of the Mind-Body-Spirit Connection

Post Traumatic Growth: How Chronic Pain Became a Catalyst for Transformation

The Patient Care Dynamic: Experiences From Both Sides of the Treatment Table

Experiencing the Multi-Factorial Nature of Painful Bladder Syndrome

Healing Through Chronic Pain: A Physical Therapist's Personal Strategies to Calm the Body/Mind

Healing Through Chronic Pain: A Physical Therapist's Personal Communication Strategies

Healing Through Chronic Pain: A Physical Therapist's Personal Strategies to Take Control

Healing Through Chronic Pain: A Physical Therapist's Personal Strategies to Maintain Hope