

LIVING WELL WITH PAIN AND ILLNESS

*The difference between a good life and a bad life
is how well you walk through the fire.*

—Carl Jung



Over the last three and a half decades, I have learned a lot about living with pain and illness. It's only fair to say it hasn't always been the smoothest of journeys. What I have come to know for certain, however, is that when it comes to living well with pain and illness, the following things really help:

Build a Strong Team Around You.

Develop a supportive network of people around you who believe in you, your dreams, your hopes, and your abilities—and who will stand strong by you in your desire to embrace and live your life fully. Let them know how much you appreciate them and how much you value the part they play in your life.

Be Your Own Health Advocate and Guru.

See your physical and mental health as being your responsibility—not the responsibility of your doctor or any other health professional, family member, colleague, or friend. It is *your* body, mind, heart, soul, and spirit. Whilst it is important to be open to the knowledge, experience, and advice of health specialists, ultimately, it is up to you to educate yourself and best understand your health condition to look after yourself well.

Stay on Top of Current Research.

Keep researching treatment options and new developments regarding your specific health condition, sharing, and discussing your findings with your doctors. Even if your doctors have

told you there is no effective medication or cure for your health condition now, it does not necessarily mean there never will be.

See Yourself as a Whole Person.

Treat yourself holistically: mind, body, spirit, soul. See that they are all elements of you and interconnected; you must treat yourself kindly and nourish and feed each of part of yourself well. Don't put all your focus and energies into one or two of them and starve or ignore the rest.

Develop Comfort and Coping Practices.

Be open-minded to trying things that may help you. Whether it is listening to music or watching a film to distract yourself from pain, visualisation, meditation, or mindfulness, pottering in the garden, going to a support group, taking a drive in the country, doing a little cooking, or picking up the phone to talk with a friend, the list is endless. Utilise the things that help you positively and beneficially and have the courage to minimise or park the rest.

Expand Your World—Do Not Keep Your World Too Small.

Reach out to others and enjoy their company on the days you feel up to it; be productive and still go places and actively do things. Focus on doing what you *can* do—not on any limitations your illness imposes on you. Showing up filled up and participating as fully as you can in life will bring you more feel-good feelings than isolating yourself and retreating from life or withdrawing into your shell.

Be Open to Conventional Medical Practices as well as Complementary Treatments and Therapies.

You are an individual and unique. Therefore, remain open-minded regarding treatments and therapies that may help you. Accept that no one size fits all or is the perfect treatment that will work for everyone, but the options are plentiful. If something interests you or feels right to you and is unlikely to do you any harm, be willing to try it and trust that you know your body best.

Trust Your Voice (And Do Not Be Afraid to Speak Up)!

Doctors are not God; they are human and can have their off days like the rest of us. However, any doctor who is rude, arrogant, or condescending to you—dismissive, uncaring, judgmental, not understanding your condition and how it affects you, or accusing you of exaggerating your pain—is not the right doctor for you. You deserve the best care and treatment, including a doctor on your side who wants only the best for you. Be prepared and willing to change your GP if need be or change your practice until you find a doctor who fully supports you. Seek another opinion from a different consultant if need be. Trust your voice, speak up, and be heard.

Befriend Your Body; It Is Not Your Enemy.

Work with your body, not against it. Your body is part of you and not the enemy. Take quiet time regularly to ask your body, ‘How can I best serve you? How can I best help you? What do you most need from me today to help you experience greater comfort or function best?’ Ask, listen, trust, and respond. Get to know your body well and confidently act on its needs.

Feel It. Heal It. Let It Go.

Your body has enough to contend with without adding negative thoughts and emotions for it to deal with as well. Allow yourself to grieve if need be; feel angry; acknowledge regret, guilt, or blame; question ‘why me?’; or spend a short while feeling sorry for yourself and in victim mode. *You are human, and it is natural to feel these emotions and work through these things.* Hanging on to negativity, however, does not help. A negative mind will never bring you a positive experience of life.

Pay Little Attention to Discouragement.

See that a bad day is simply a bad day and does not necessarily need to turn into a bad week, bad month, or bad year for you. Reminding yourself that you only ever must deal with the moment you are in now can help you get through those more difficult days when darkness descends.

Respect and Protect Your Own Space.

Protect your space and establish your boundaries when it comes to the advice you may receive from well-wishers, for example, ‘Have you tried XYZ yet?’ ‘My friend had that and says she’s cured now.’ ‘Perhaps you should try some exercise or get out more?’ Offer the benefit of the doubt to people and believe they have offered their advice with the best intentions. Listen and take on board any advice you feel may be helpful. Park the rest, however—and do not feel bad about it. You alone are the expert on your own life.

Spend More Time in Your Heart, Less Time in Your Head.

Avoid complicating life by overthinking every decision, action, communication, or thought. Keep things simple (and a lot less tiring and stressful) by thinking less and feeling more. Learn to trust your intuition: the essence, truth, soul, and heart of *you*.

Believe and Know You Can Handle It—Whatever ‘It’ Is.

Worry is like a rocking chair. It will give you something to do, but it will not get you anywhere. Live with faith and trust. Believe and know that you have all the power within you to deal with whatever life brings. One moment, one next best step at a time, is all you ever need to do.

Find Your People; Connect with Your Tribe.

When it comes to chronic pain and illness, unless someone else has ‘got it’, it is unlikely they will truly get you. Join an uplifting and positive support group where you can mix with others who clearly understand the pain and challenges you go through without the need for you to be constantly explaining your illness or talking about or focusing on the problems you have. Alternatively, find and work with an inspiring personal coach or mentor who has experienced similar things or walked the same path you are on.

Always Remember Life is Precious.

Whilst death may be the destination of your physical body (and you can rest at peace in the knowledge that your spirit and soul will live on), when you wake up in the morning and find you are still breathing, rise and give thanks. *Know that your job on earth is not yet done!*