Six Ways to Make Life With Chronic Pain Easier

by KATARINA ZULAK

Top Six Tips for Living With Chronic Pain

“I realized this week that I just cannot do it all. So I will choose to do what I can, fabulously.” (Clinton Kelly)

I am a busy 30-something mother to a three and a half-year-old, going on 10-year old boy. My husband works swing shift. We have two dogs. I work in a bustling diabetes education office; I teach a yoga class every Saturday morning at 10:00 am and I also work as a freelance writer for *NewLifeOutlook*.

Oh, and did I mention the holidays are fast approaching? And I’m planning trips to New York City and Los Angeles – and I’ll be going on both trips in the span of a two week period?

Yes, this is all normal, everyday life. But when you have chronic pain, daily life can be *difficult*.

For example, I generally submit my articles by their due dates – because as writers, that is how we get paid, right? Well, on Monday, I had to email my lovely editor. “Hi there – sorry I’m a bit behind. I’ve been a bit unwell with my migraines this past week. I’ll be caught up shortly.”

Her lovely response? After extending the due date, “It’s important to take care of yourself. Health is first!” There may have been a smiley face emoji in there too.

So, my fellow friends with chronic pain, remember the aforementioned quote from Clinton Kelly – you may *be able* not do it all! But do it fabulously!

Below, you’ll find four tips from a fellow writer who also suffers from chronic pain, Katarina Zulak. I have added tips #5 and #6 about how to deal with chronic pain every day.

1. Advocate for a Healthcare Team That Actually Plays for Your Side

I remember sitting in my GP's office and asking, "So what else can we try for my back pain?" I was losing multiple days at work per month and had been in pain for over a year.

Her answer was "Well, just continue taking Robaxacet, and that's about all I can do for you." I realized in that moment that she wasn't actually interested in working with me to improve my health and had washed her hands of my case.

I felt frustrated, alone, and was rapidly losing hope about ever getting help for my chronic pain. Too many chronic pain patients have felt dismissed or disbelieved by their healthcare practitioners.

I deserve better. We all do.

This realization is the foundation of my self-advocacy. I began looking for another GP. The process wasn't easy — one doctor I met with never even raised her eyes from the computer screen to look at me!

Eventually I met my current doctor, who is knowledgeable and respectful. She refers me to specialists when the health problem is beyond her scope. Most importantly, she presents me with the options and respects my final decision.

She practices patient-centered care. This kind of doctor-patient relationship is called a therapeutic relationship, and studies show that patient health outcomes improve when there is a therapeutic relationship with the doctor!

I encourage you to advocate for yourself in finding a healthcare team that validates your experiences and partners with you to improve your health and wellbeing.

2. Change Positions Often

Trying to find a comfortable position is an hourly struggle when you have chronic pain. The back of one of my closets is a graveyard for unhelpful backrests and support cushions.

My physiotherapist explained to me that even the most ergonomic chair will become uncomfortable after sitting too long. The key is to change positions.

This straightforward tip has greatly improved my daily comfort level. I make sure to stand, take a few steps, stretch or lie down to rest in between periods of sitting. If I don't, I pay for it later! Sometimes I set an alarm every half an hour to remind me.

3. Move More (But Listen to Your Body)

Moving more has been the single most helpful tool in my pain management toolbox. I don't mean an intensive gym regimen, which for many people with chronic pain is only a recipe for flaring up.

I began moving more by including a stretching routine into my mornings. Flexibility/range of motion exercise programs are a great starting point for anyone who has not exercised for a while, or who has a health condition that makes movement challenging.

These types of exercise can also build strength and promote balance, but primarily focus on lengthening tight muscles and moving joints through the full span of movement they are intended to achieve.

Yoga, Tai Chi, and Qi Gong are all examples of flexibility/ROM programs that have been proven to help manage chronic pain.

Walking has also become essential for my daily pain management and can be adapted to my pain level. Most days I try to go for a 15-20 minute walk, but on flare days I only pace the perimeter of my apartment several times throughout the day.

Walking has been found to reduce pain and improve daily functioning for chronic muscle pain. It's important to go at your own pace and proceed gently. Listen to your body!

4. Be Open to New Tools and Treatments

Mainstream medicine offers a variety of medications, surgeries and other interventions to treat chronic pain — but rarely are any of these options 100% effective.

Most chronic conditions require a multidisciplinary approach — a combination of mainstream medical treatments, lifestyle changes and complementary/alternative treatments.

Before I developed chronic pain, I would probably never have considered many complementary/alternative treatments. However, my own experience and recent research have demonstrated that many can be effective.

Make sure you do your research and consult with your healthcare practitioner before you start anything new chronic pain management treatment. I am willing to try anything new as long as evidence supports it and there are minimal side effects. Here are few examples that have helped me:

- Supplements like omega-3, curcumin or boswellia have been shown in studies to help alleviate pain safely, without the side effects of some non-steroidal anti-inflammatories.
- The Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, created by Jon Kabat-Zinn to teach mindfulness meditation to patients, has demonstrated remarkable benefits for reducing chronic pain.
- Results from a number of studies demonstrate that acupuncture may help fibromyalgia, low-back pain, neck pain, osteoarthritis, migraines and tension headaches.

5. Find Alternate Ways to Get Things Done!

There will be days that you take your daily medications, your rescue medications, avoid every known trigger, and generally do *everything you are supposed to do* – yet you still have pain. The pain is so debilitating that you know that your everyday life isn't possible.

On these days, feel free to lean on your support system.

You know – when your friend says, "Let me know if there's anything I can do!" – Now is the time to call them up! Let them know that you're struggling today and could use help with an errand or two, or childcare, or whatever insurmountable task you need to complete.

I have this friend – she is a single mother of three children, works a full-time job and goes to grad school.

At our last visit, she said, "I pay one of the neighbor boys to mow the lawn. I kind of feel bad, but my lawn has to get cut. I don't have time, and my kids are too young to mow it. So, I pay him!" And I thought, if my friend can do this, why the heck can't I ask for help when I need it?

And I challenge you to do the same – rather than push yourself to do it all (because we all do!), realize it is ok to ask for help.

6. How to Deal With Chronic Pain Emotionally

Having any type of chronic condition – especially one that is painful – is stressful. In fact, having a chronic pain condition is often associated with mental health disorders.

For example, studies indicate that people with chronic pain may have a higher rate of depression. One study performed in a primary care office estimated that people with chronic pain also had major depression at a rate of about 5 percent to 10 percent. However, in a study performed in a dental clinic, this number skyrocketed to 85 percent!

Researchers also note that people who have a known cause for their pain are less likely to be depressed than people who have idiopathic (unexplained) pain. However, "patients with multiple pain symptoms are 3 to 5 times more likely to be depressed than patients without pain."

Where am I going with this?

I have generalized anxiety disorder and migraines. I am one of the statistics – I have both a chronic pain condition as well as a mental health disorder. Some days, it is like the chicken or the egg – is my migraine causing me to be anxious, or is my anxiety causing my migraine?

And then I worry that I'm not doing enough – enough at home, enough at work, enough for my son. Which compounds my anxiety, and *gives* me a migraine. And it starts a cycle.

And I'll bet you can relate.

So, friends, be easy on your beautiful selves. We're all trying to make this work the best way we can. Treat yourselves to a massage, a date with your significant other, lunch with a friend, a new book, or a hot bath. Rest when you need to. And know that you are, in fact, doing enough when it comes to living with chronic pain.