

# Searching for Healing: How to Counsel Individuals with Debilitating Chronic Pain



by ESTHER SMITH

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An estimated 125 million adults in the United States experience some form of chronic pain. If you are a counselor, you likely meet with individuals with chronic pain on a regular basis. Perhaps you are even meeting with one of the nearly 15 million individuals who experience severe levels of pain most days or every day. These individuals are often unable to work. They frequently find walking and mobility difficult. And they may need to spend several days of the week (or more) on bedrest.<sup>1</sup>

As a biblical counselor and someone who personally experiences chronic pain, I have thought long and hard about how to counsel people with similar struggles. How do we come to understand each person's unique experience of pain? How do we determine if people are getting the actual help they need? What words do they most need to hear? What pitfalls should counselors seek to avoid? And, based on this information, how can we personalize our counseling to meet the specific needs of people with chronic pain, pointing them to Christ in a way that connects with their experience?

My experience with chronic pain began five years ago when a chiropractor

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<sup>1</sup> Richard L. Nahin, "Estimates of Pain Prevalence and Severity in Adults: United States, 2012," *The Journal of Pain* 16:8 (2016): 769-780.

injured me during a routine adjustment. At first, the injury seemed small and inconsequential. I went about my life and assumed I would be back to normal in no time. But the more I pushed through the pain to keep up my regular routine, the worse my pain became.

My physical therapist diagnosed me with sacroiliac joint dysfunction, and an orthopedic doctor showed me an ultrasound of the damage. The ligaments that hold together the sacrum and ilium bones in my pelvis were swollen and torn, leaving everything to shift painfully out of place on a constant basis. For several years my pain was severe and debilitating. I was unable to work for more than a few hours a week, and unable to walk for longer than a few minutes. I looked normal and healthy on the outside, but I was forced to spend the majority of each day lying flat on my back.

This was a confusing time. As I sought to deal with my emotional and spiritual confusion, I looked to the same Christian books and resources that helped me through other life struggles, but I felt disoriented by what I read. Many of the lessons I had been taught about godly living now felt impossible to carry out on a regular basis. If I heard a sermon about service to others, I'd then feel guilty for those days when I was unable to get out of bed. I was the one who needed help! Was God displeased with me? Articles by authors I respected told me that skipping church was wrong and meant I was backsliding. But what about people like me who wanted to go to church, but, at times, couldn't sit through the service? Did anyone even know this category of persons exists?

I remember a friend sharing her testimony of how God brings us through seasons of suffering to the other side. I wondered how I was supposed to hold on to hope when my "season" of suffering could, very realistically, last for my lifetime. I might not ever get to "the other side." Nothing about God and the inerrancy of Scripture changed when I transitioned from healthy to sick. God was still God. Serving and being in Christian community were still important. Everything in Scripture still applied to me, but I needed to do the work of connecting Scripture to my life in a way that aligned with my new physical reality.

After years of physical therapy and other treatments, I am thankful to be in a better place. My pain is still chronic, and I expect to deal with the effects

of my injury for the rest of my life. But for now, I am blessed to experience some relief. I cannot express how much joy I feel to be in less pain. But I also constantly remember those who have not experienced relief and have suffered decline instead. I know what that is like. I know the loneliness. I know the constant, unbearable pain. I know the countless losses, questions, doubts, and overwhelming feelings. And I know how difficult it can be to find help.

I decided to write this article after a conversation with several friends who told me they had sought help to process their experience of severe pain, but found counseling to be disappointing. They felt misunderstood, sometimes judged, and, in the end, felt that the advice and Scripture offered fell short. I want to help counselors avoid these mistakes. I want you to know what chronic pain is really like, and what people need to hear and do when they experience suffering of this kind. This article addresses three areas of concentration that will help you tailor your counseling so it is truly helpful.

1. *Know people with chronic pain in the midst of their suffering.* Invite these sufferers to show you who they really are. Become an avid learner of their pain and a witness to their unique physical affliction.
2. *Help people process and respond to their chronic pain.* These sufferers experience many losses as a result of their disability. Guide people through their grief. Mourn with them—these losses are deep. And help them strategize steps toward potential physical improvement, even when full healing isn't possible.
3. *Point people beyond their physical suffering.* Help draw sufferers to the healing and hope that come from knowing Christ and living for him.

We will explore each of these in greater depth.

### **Know Your Counselors in the Midst of Their Suffering**

To offer appropriate counsel, you must come to understand what living with chronic pain is like and be aware of the unique concerns these strugglers often have. I have collected these concerns into three categories: specific fears related to the counseling process, the challenge of describing persistent physical pain, and the complexities of their inner experience and emotional responses to suffering. Consider exploring these areas as you get to know your counselees.

*First, know your counselee's deepest fears regarding counseling.* Almost all counselees walk into their first session with some level of trepidation. Many

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*The Journal of Biblical Counseling*

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

[www.ccef.org](http://www.ccef.org)

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