

## Sal's Place

# The Pain of Disbelief

Imagine for a moment that you suddenly have an excruciating stomach pain. Doubled over, you head to the doctor's office and explain what you are feeling. After a few questions, the doctor busily hurries off to his next patient after telling you to wait it out and see what happens.

You wait two days and the pain continues and sharpens. So you return to the doctor and are told to take some aspirin. Insisting something is seriously wrong, you are given the "look" that says, "I have real patients to help. Go see a psych."

You call another doctor and say it's an emergency and are told it will be a 4 month wait and that you should go to the ER if it's urgent. The ER tells you to go see your regular doctor after running a few tests and finding nothing unusual.

Relieved to have finally had some tests to rule out anything serious, you return home to ongoing pain. Doctor after doctor, none are able to tell you why you are in pain. Most treat you with disdain and don't bother to run any tests. One told you to get help for your depression. Depression? How is this pain "depression"? "Do you feel anxious all the time?" he asks.

Soon you start going home sick from work because the pain is so intense that it's all you can think about. Your boss finds you in the restroom doubled over in tears and sends you home, saying not to return until you are better. "Maybe you need a vacation. You seem stressed." Vacation? "How's that going to diagnose or cure my illness?" you ask. Your boss responds with a chastising look.

Aspirin helps a bit, though it's not strong enough

and wears off to quickly, leaving you tired and sleepy. Life can't go on like this. What's wrong with you? Why won't the doctors do more tests and try to help?

Now you are becoming depressed because no one will listen. Well, maybe not depressed but despondent. Every time you mention your pain as you try to sort things out, do research, and make more medical appointments to find a solution, you are chastised by your family. "You really need get help for this obsession with your health," says your spouse. Obsession?

Now you scream in frustration and anger. You just want your life back the way it was! You are doing everything you can to find out what's wrong and get treatment and everyone around you calls you "anxious",

"depressed", "stressed", and "obsessed". They think it's all in your head. "I just wish someone would believe me!"

All too late and years later, perhaps after years of useless psychotherapy, you finally get a real diagnosis. You've had colon cancer all along. But it's not operable anymore because it was found too late. Why didn't anyone listen? Why must you pay with your life?

Fibromyalgia (FM) is a condition characterized by widespread pain, chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS) by debilitating fatigue, and multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) by exquisite sensitivity to everyday chemicals and fragrances. Few clinically relevant test findings are available to make a clear diagnosis. The doctor may say there's no science or study to support it, yet you feel the pain, fatigue, and disabling reactions. Or you could have an accepted condition like cancer that has simply gone undiagnosed because you were too young, too athletic, or too disheveled from your agony to appear credible to your doctors.



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Not surprisingly, nursing researchers Clarke and Iphofen found that being disbelieved left patients with feelings of anger, frustration, isolation, depression, and eventually thoughts of suicide. Just imagine what they will say when they find you took your own life out of desperation in painful isolation and alienation? “I knew it was in his head all along.”

Clarke and Iphofen say, “The effect of believing patients’ account of a chronic pain experience cannot be underestimated. In this small study, patients expressed gratitude, relief and even surprise when they find their pain experiences are accepted at face value without having to ‘prove’ its existence.”

Further, “This apparent need to feel

that their pain story is credible appears to be unique to chronic pain patients. Having healthcare professionals believe the pain experience helps to alleviate its negativity by empowering patients to move forward with management, rather than endlessly seeking a cure.”

The study concludes that health professionals need to believe what their patients report, and that extends to family and friends. If the problem is never acknowledged, a solution cannot be found. Acknowledging the problem is the first step to move toward a solution in a positive and forward manner. To do otherwise is to ensure eventual demise.

Believe your patients. Believe your loved ones. Encourage the ill and help them to find out what’s wrong and what they can do to treat it. Come up with joint strategies for living.

Counseling can help if you are having trouble coping with your loved one’s pain. There is still room in the relationship, for better or for worse, to live life to the fullest. We are not defined by our pain. We are defined by who we are, what we do, and how we live. We have but to be open, to embrace challenges, and forge forward!

Be well!

### Reference

Clarke, K.A., Iphofen, R. (2008). The effects of failing to believe patients’ experience of chronic pain. *Nursing Times*; 104: 8, 30-31.

