

AFTER ENDURING AN EXPERIENCE WITH chronic pain myself, I've since specialized in working with patients with pain in my psychiatric medical practice. Jim Broatch asked me recently what I've learned from my work treating people with pain and helping them learn to cope with a chronic pain disease. These are some reflections on 10 years of this work.

❶ Chronic Pain is a Bad Disease

No kidding, right? Chronic pain is a bad, life-changing disease. Diseases such as cancer get more attention and sympathy,



across the US, many led by fellow patients with CRPS. There are mailing lists and chats by phone. Thus there are ways to connect with others and to take advantage of being in a community. I believe this to be a crucial part of treating and coping with CRPS and other pain disorders.

❷ A Belief in the Power of the Field of Medicine

We certainly don't know everything about diagnosing and treating pain. Unfortunately, less common diseases such as CRPS fare even worse in terms of the

What I've Learned from Working with People with Pain

By Sarah M. Whitman, MD

but chronic pain can be just as scary, debilitating and isolating, if not more so. As pain is invisible, patients sometimes don't get the understanding, support and empathy they deserve. Organizations working to increase awareness, such as RSDSA, are crucial.

❸ A Resilient Spirit

Despite how difficult pain can be to experience, nearly all patients I've worked with have not given up. They are courageous and persistent. They've inspired me both in their ongoing journeys to heal, as well as how they focus on getting on with their lives despite pain. Many patients are even able to create positive changes in their lives and to grow as they face a challenging illness—what I think of as creating “silver linings.”

❹ People Maintain their Positive Qualities

Despite the pain itself, as well as all the

negative life changes that can accompany a pain diagnosis, patients are still kind, generous, and willing to help others. I'm always surprised how many patients ask how I am, how was my vacation, how are things going for me, etc., despite 10/10 CRPS pain. Patients in the Coping with Pain groups I lead support and care for each other, despite having more than their share of troubles themselves. Despite the extreme challenge of ongoing pain, people are able to let their good qualities shine through, and should give themselves much credit for this.

❺ A Vibrant Helping Community

As a result of my own website and blog (www.HowToCopeWithPain.org), I visit many other pain blogs and interact with the online pain community. There is an abundance of information, support, and connection on these blogs and websites, and in forums and chat rooms. There are in-person and online CRPS support groups

medical community's understanding and the level of research dedicated to this illness. However, the understanding of pain and its treatment is definitely progressing, and I truly believe hope is warranted. Without putting their lives on hold to focus on pain or chasing after each new fad of treatment, patients should definitely keep up to date and be willing to try new treatments which have shown promise. I do believe that each year there will be better treatments and eventually a cure.

For me, working with patients with pain has been a calling. It's been an honor, as well, to work with brave, caring people who face the great challenge of CRPS.

Sarah M. Whitman, MD, is a psychiatrist who specializes in pain management, and hosts the website HowToCopeWithPain.org. Her interests include hypnosis, spirituality, and newer treatments such as graded motor imagery and fMRI. ■