

EXCERPT

The Pain Companion

*Practical Tools for Living With
and Moving Beyond Chronic Pain*



Sarah Anne Shockley

Any Road Press

Fairfax, California

Cover art based on a photo by
Tenaya Mazur Russell
Copyright © 2016 Sarah Anne Shockley

All rights reserved. No portion of this manuscript may be reproduced without written permission from the author
Library of Congress Control Number: 2015904221
ISBN: 978-0-9641279-1-3

Disclaimer

Nothing in this book constitutes medical advice and it is not intended to be a substitute for the medical advice of physicians. The reader should consult a physician in matters relating to his or her health and particularly with respect to any symptoms that may require diagnosis or medical attention. The reader understands that they take full responsibility for the effects generated from the use of any suggestions or exercises presented in this book and that it is up to them to use their discretion and common sense in this regard.

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	ix
PART 1: PAIN MOVES IN	
1 Life Taken Over by Pain	3
2 The Submersion of the Self	8
3 When Pain Won't Leave	12
4 Feeling Bad About Feeling Bad	15
5 Having Compassion for Yourself	18
PART 2: THE EMOTIONAL LIFE OF CHRONIC PAIN	
6 Pain's Emotional Traps	23
7 Guilt and Shame	26
8 Anger and Blame	36
9 Victimization and Powerlessness	41
10 Fear, Anxiety, and Stress	45
11 Isolation and Loneliness	51
12 Invisibility and Silence	59
13 Physical and Emotional Exhaustion	65
14 Sadness and Loss	71
PART 3: MEDITATIVE APPROACHES TO PHYSICAL PAIN	
15 Discovering Pain's Purpose	79
16 The Body Made Wrong	83
17 Finding a New Approach	87
18 Communicating with Pain	91
19 Soothing the Wild Animal	95
20 Introcution to Meditative Exercises	99
21 Releasing Breath	101
22 Unlocking Contraction	105
23 Paying Attention to Pain	109
24 Shifting Your Relationship to Pain	113
25 Loving the Places that Hurt	117
26 Imaging Pain's Form	121
27 Giving Pain What it Wants	125
28 Writing Pain a Letter of Complaint	129
29 Pain As Messenger	133
30 Telling Pain Your Story	137
31 Listening to Pain	140
PART 4: WHEN PAIN IS THE TEACHER	
32 Resistance is Futile	147
33 What I Learned From Pain	151
34 The Nature of True Healing	159
35 Enlisting Pain as an Ally	163
36 You Are Not Your Pain	168
37 Some Concluding Thoughts	172

Introduction

I HAVE LIVED with continuous, often intense physical pain since the fall of 2007. Every aspect of my life has been deeply affected, as certainly are the lives of those of you reading these words who also suffer from chronic pain.

Living in constant pain has been one of the most challenging things I have ever had to undergo in my life. It has been difficult not only because of the physical suffering, but also due to the intense emotional repercussions. These emotional states include loss, grief, shame and terror; and can be nearly as demanding as the physical pain.

During this time, I have often felt isolated and alone. I did not have access to a support group, nor did I feel well enough to attend one if I had. You may find yourself in a similar situation now. I have written this book to offer you the companion I wish I'd had, a guide on your journey to living with more ease and grace even in the midst of pain and, ultimately, to relieving and releasing pain.

The Pain Companion is not meant to replace conventional physical remedies, medications or procedures or the many excellent alternative healing modalities available today.

Instead, this book addresses the inner life of physical pain, how our responses to pain affect both its potency and longevity, and how that relationship has the potential to either contribute to prolonged suffering or provide a pathway to restoring health and well-being. It provides practical advice for living with chronic pain *and* for relieving suffering on mental, emotional, and physical levels.

HOW THIS BOOK IS SET UP:

Part One: When Pain Comes To Stay, addresses the ways physical suffering affects our lives. It shines light on how pain moves in and takes over our experience, and how we respond to it.

Part Two: The Emotional Life of Physical Pain addresses the very deep and persistent fears, anxieties, sadness, anger and shame that living with chronic physical pain tends to engender, intensify and hold in place.

These are the unseen but potent sides of pain that are seldom talked about and usually given very little room for expression. They include emotional, psychological and spiritual dimensions which are very much interwoven with each other and with the nature of physical pain itself.

Part Two also offers simple, practical steps to work with and help ease these psychological and emotional consequences of living with pain.

Part Three: Working Directly With Pain, presents 11 meditative exercises I developed for myself to help open a path to physical relief and release. These are the most effective methods I found to create a more beneficial and healing relationship with the pain in my body. More than any other

approach I had been offered by medical or therapeutic models, they helped reduce the amount of physical pain I was experiencing.

In *Part Four: Pain Becomes the Teacher*, I present some of the most important life lessons I have learned with pain as my mentor, which offer invaluable wisdom for living life with more ease, grace and wisdom. This section also discusses creating true healing and transformation in life while moving on from the place of pain.

I CANNOT KNOW your personal suffering, of course; only you can. But I do understand the experience of being in significant and relentless pain for long periods of time, and I understand the fear, sadness and frustration associated with long-term physical debilitation. So, I can say that this book has been written from *inside* of pain, a perspective on the experience and the healing of pain that we are seldom offered.

I honor you for the courageous journey you are on. May these ideas help you cultivate deep compassion for yourself and aid you in finding increased well-being, peace and solace as well as bodily relief.

1

LIFE TAKEN OVER BY PAIN

IN THE FALL of 2007, I developed Thoracic Outlet Syndrome (TOS) due to prolonged computer use in a non-ergonomic office set-up. Simply put, the area between my collarbones and first ribs collapsed, severely compressing the space to less than 20% of its normal width on both sides of my body.

This compression was excruciating, squeezing a major artery, veins, nerve ganglia, and the large scalene muscles running down from the neck to the first ribs, all of which must fit through this relatively small space.

This caused intense burning sensations in my neck, deep aches in my palms, wrists, and neck, and shooting pains in my neck and forearms. A continuous migraine headache often flared alarmingly, setting the right side of my brain on fire. I had flu-like dizziness, weakness and fatigue and loss of mobility and functionality in my arms and hands.

Anything that required me to use my arms away from my body, even the smallest lifting, pushing, pulling, reaching, grasping, or carrying caused a sharp spike in pain levels. I could barely turn or tilt my neck to either side, up or down, and had to move my whole body slowly and carefully to look at someone next to me. I walked extremely slowly and tilted somewhat forward, like a very ancient person in bad shape.

In an effort to restore myself to health, I tried numerous approaches to healing: traditional physical therapy, Network Chiropractic, movement protocols meant specifically to help TOS, Anderson Method, Feldenkrais, energy healing, and vitamin and herb supplements, to name a few.

Although some of these approaches brought some temporary relief, none actually healed the TOS, and the majority of them immediately made things worse by further irritating the nerves and tissues. After trying a new approach, it usually took a number of days, and sometimes weeks, for the flare-up to calm down and the irritated nerves and swollen tissues to return to a more stable state.

Pharmaceuticals were also unsuccessful in relieving the nerve pain or aiding my overall condition. Instead, they created disagreeable side effects that added to the melange of unpleasant symptoms already affecting most of my body, so I quickly stopped using those.

Since I couldn't dull the pain, I dulled myself instead and withdrew, becoming very still and quiet. It hurt to breathe deeply, so I sat propped up with pillows, my hands turned up and open, trying to breathe as lightly as possible and waiting for deliverance. If I waited long enough, I reasoned, the pain would go away and my body would receive the healing it needed through my careful stillness.

By the fall of 2008, I had been in intense, unceasing and debilitating pain for the better part of a year and was not making any appreciable headway toward healing either through traditional or

alternative methods. I felt as if I'd embarked on a nightmarish ocean liner heading out into dark and rough waters on a voyage with no predetermined destination and no way to disembark.

At first, I had thought everything was about to get better and I would simply rejoin my life where I'd left off. It was an excursion I hadn't desired or asked for, but at least it would soon be over and I would carry on with life as usual. Every other malady I'd suffered had always had an ending. I had always healed before. Always.

But that's not what happened.

Many months passed before I fully understood the extent of my injuries. After an MRI scan and a series of diagnostics, my neurologist carefully explained that the extent of my TOS was unusually severe. Sadly, he informed me that I couldn't expect to heal anytime soon, if at all, and, in fact, the condition was often progressive; it could steadily get worse.

In a two-hour consultation, a leading thoracic surgeon went over my status with me comprehensively, explaining that there really wasn't anything he could offer except a surgery of dubious merit in which my top two ribs would be removed. The recovery period would be very painful and protracted. And, for me, it wouldn't be a permanent solution; I could expect my TOS to return.

These prognoses landed with me like dead weights. I had to come to terms with the fact that I would most probably not be returning to work or my normal activities. Ever. Along with living in pain, I realized that I was going to have to deal with the stress of making do with very reduced financial circumstances over a long period of time, as well as the ongoing sadness and distress of having had my normal, active life disappear, virtually overnight.

With the understanding that I was going to be physically impaired and in pain for a very long time, most likely the rest of my life, I entered a period of intense emotional challenge. My usual positive attitude faltered and I began to experience decreased well-being, and a constant barrage of worry about the future. I woke each day in the same dark state of mind, my body in extreme pain and the condition of my life feeling the same, the same, the same, bleak morning after bleak morning.

Before my injury, I had considered myself resourceful, positive, intelligent and capable. I certainly didn't expect others to figure things out for me. My inability to restore my body to health, therefore, was a source of deep frustration. Virtually everything I was doing to heal myself was leading nowhere constructive, and often made things worse. What was I missing? What was I doing wrong?



Dear Pain,

You have become such a forceful presence; it is almost like living with another person. My whole life has been hijacked by you. Other people say you come and go. You give them breaks for hours or days or even weeks, but you've decided to keep me company every single minute of every single day.

I realize now that the twinges and aches I felt at first were only your early scouts. Now you're here in full force – pressing, insistent, nasty, intense. You are unstoppable and all-pervasive. And

you stay and stay and stay.

Why have you decided to stick with me so relentlessly, so adamantly, and with such passionate dedication?



THE SUBMERSION OF THE SELF

WHEN WE EXPERIENCE severe pain, constant pain, insistent pain, the situation quickly becomes overwhelming. So much of our attention and energy is directed toward dealing with the pain that we can feel submerged underneath its demands.

The choices that have to be made, the responsibilities we still have despite a physical impairment, and the sensations of pain themselves seem to be drowning us. It becomes difficult to think clearly, to have conversations, to be available for life, to be available to the self.

Pain, therefore, rules our experience. It dictates how we can and can't use our body. We do only as much as it allows us to do. We sleep only as much as it allows us to sleep. When it has something to say, we are its captive audience. We interact with others with less enthusiasm and less energy. We become worn out and discouraged, completely at the mercy of its whims.

Pain becomes our primary focus. It is its nature. Its presence is all-encompassing. When pain is either very severe or very long-lived, it can feel like a separate entity, a being with its own mind.

It is like living with something or someone else in our body, a power unto itself, which we must serve. It has its own agenda and keeps its own schedules. Its needs are immediate and, seemingly, insatiable. We spend a great deal of time and energy bowing to it, taking care of it, trying to ease it, or imploring it to leave.

Tasks that were easy before become difficult and exhausting. Before the brain even attempts to tackle a problem or meet a demand, it feels overloaded and overwhelmed. Things that require a response – the phone, a question, paperwork – can seem like an invasion or attack. So little of us is left that is not overtaken by pain, there remains almost no energy with which to make decisions, to think, to feel, to love.

After living for days, weeks, and months with pain as the director of life, we can lose sight of our own primacy, and the primacy of other people and situations that are important or dear to us.

It's easy to feel irritable with everyone, with life, with ourselves. Part of the irritability is from the constant braying of nerves in pain, of course, but part is the frustration of not being able to control it. It feels like our bodies are no longer our own, and that is truly a very frightening invasion. It's too close, too intimate.

In addition, there are the stresses that accompany every waking moment, including the uncertainty about healing - if and when it will happen - and the unknowns of how to survive practically and financially.

We must face difficult questions, often with limited physical, mental, and financial resources with which to meet them: What will happen if I can't take care of my children? What if I can no longer pay my mortgage or rent? Should I take a specific drug? Who will help me make sense of all these forms? How will I go shopping, do the laundry, clean? How can I afford to pay someone

to help me?

BEING IN CONSTANT physical pain is like living underwater. The pain sensations are not only felt in the body, they seem to become an extended energy field around the body, creating a separate reality that no one else shares.

There is no one inside your world of pain with you; you are utterly alone there. Even others who are also suffering do not share the same pain.

The sensation of pain, then, creates boundaries around the entire experience of life. It becomes the environment and the substance in which the self is immersed. The world recedes, often to a seemingly unreachable distance. Only echoes of it remain. Normal life seems remote; everything filtered and distanced by the field of pain and the stress that comes with it, surrounding and penetrating all experience.



Dear Pain,

I am trying everything I can think of to make you happy. To make you calm down. To make you go away. I have tried eradicating, releasing, relieving, mitigating, cajoling, begging and ignoring you. Yet you are astonishingly resilient. You refuse to budge. Almost everything I do makes you louder and more insistent.

Today I was alarmed to discover that the only sensations I have left are painful ones. My entire body is a burning, painful structure. If there is a part of me that is not in pain, I can't feel it anymore. You have taken over my entire experience of my body!

Are you trying to push me out of my body? I don't believe I am this pain, so where am I? What is left of me?



WHEN PAIN WON'T LEAVE

TYPICALLY IN WESTERN medicine, one of the first things a doctor does for us when we're in physical pain is to provide medication or therapeutic treatment that eases the discomfort. A treatment is considered most successful if it not only addresses the physical ailment, but substantially reduces or eradicates pain. In fact, in some cases, the only "cure" available to us is pharmaceutical pain relief.

And, of course, most of us are very happy to be on the receiving end of pain relief when we need it. Having the goal of easing pain serves the important purpose of helping us become more comfortable so our bodies can rest and thereby heal more quickly. This is all well and good if the pain does end, the purpose is served, and we heal. However, as we well know, not all pain responds to medication and treatment.

When our doctors have run out of options and we continue to experience ongoing, even debilitating pain; when the level and duration of the pain tests the limits of our patience and our doctors' expertise, what then?

Because we generally treat all pain in the same way, and because we have the understandable, but unattainable, goal of ending all pain as quickly as possible, the persistence of pain can't help but imply a level of defeat.

When well-meaning doctors and therapists have timetables and expectations for our recovery that don't work out, it can oddly and unjustifiably feel like we are ailing in other ways: we aren't a good enough patient, our body hasn't responded correctly, something else is wrong with us, we're not normal, we must be malingering.

Our condition of continued pain can seem to morph from something unavoidable as a result of injury or illness into something unresolved and lingering, perhaps even appearing suspicious to others not experiencing it themselves.

This puts us in a very uncomfortable position. Because pain medications work on some kinds of pain, but not ours, we may feel that our chronic condition is a negative reflection on us: there is something wrong with us for continuing to experience pain.

We may feel abandoned by the medical establishment who has metaphorically thrown up its hands. Left to our own devices, we have become, in many ways, our own last resort, yet we have no idea how to access the switch to turn the pain off.

Our distressing lack of clear movement toward healing is only underscored by the positive suggestions of others (have you tried X?), the barrage of drugs we have taken to no avail, and the various treatments we have undergone with mixed or little success. It can appear that it isn't the drugs, or the treatments that have failed, it's *us*.

When pain insists on remaining in place despite pharmaceuticals, physical therapies, surgeries or other forms of therapeutic treatments and alternative modalities, instead of applying more of the same, we need to consider changing course altogether.

In my experience, short term pain and chronic pain require very different approaches to pain relief and ongoing pain management. Chronic pain is a very complex condition involving much more than just the physical symptoms of the body. It includes emotional and psychological aspects as well due to the incredible stresses of living with pain day in and day out, and the ramifications of basically losing one's life to pain.



Dear Pain,

Why are you still here? I am frustrated and annoyed. I seem only to be getting worse, and you are not leaving. You, Pain, have moved in.

I didn't recognize the You of you for a full 10 months. I treated you with respect, yes, but with the respect due a temporary lodger. I kept expecting you to leave. I dealt patiently with the extreme discomfort of your constant boarding because I assumed it was to be short lived.

You are like a guest who shows up, unpacks in the living room and, pulling out an old brass horn, starts playing loudly and out of tune. Tirelessly you play on day and night as if to discover who will wear out first. I have. I'm worn out. Stop. Please. Just go away.



FEELING BAD ABOUT FEELING BAD

IF YOUR PAIN is new, you may still be in a degree of emotional and physical shock - shock from the illness or injury and shock from the trauma of having your affairs, your work, your life, and your relationships superseded by pain.

You may also suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a condition that occurs after severe stress, change, sudden loss or injury, or, as I found, from long-term disability, chronic pain, or a life-changing illness.

PTSD can cause you to become easily overwhelmed, highly irritable, disoriented, terrified for no apparent reason, and suffer insomnia and nightmares.

Living in pain for an extended period of time elicits its own strong emotional and psychological responses as well. These occur because of the physical discomfort we are in, obviously, but also because we are apparently losing the battle.

We are at the mercy of something that has moved in and taken over our experience. We fear that, in some hidden and insidious way, we are to blame both for its existence and our lack of success in making it all better.

Some of these intense emotional responses include grief, sadness, loss, shame, blame, resentment, failure, isolation, loneliness, and powerlessness. Because these emotions are powerful, and because they may live with us for as long as pain abides, they can eventually override our experience of ourselves and our lives.

They are understandable reactions to a life that has been overtaken by pain, but, as time passes, we may lose our sense of who we really are.

Days of joy and ease recede into the distance and it begins to seem as if we have always felt this bad. We have trouble remembering how to laugh freely, what our bodies felt like without pain, and what it was like just to feel generally okay.

Living with constant pain, I initially wanted to minimize any and all further suffering, so I tended to ignore or deny the emotional pain that I was also undergoing.

Ultimately, this was not a helpful choice. Over time, the experience of physical pain and our emotional responses to it can become interlocked, each cementing the other in place. They weave together like a Celtic knot, seemingly inextricable from each other.

Some emotions are contractive reactions to pain. When we are locked in these emotional states, the body responds by tightening and contracting. This contraction of the body serves to further lock bodily pain in place.

It inhibits the free flow of breath, the free movement of life force and renewing energy through the body, and impedes healing. Examples of feelings that tend to contract and tighten the body are: resentment, bitterness, blame, and anger.

Emotions that drag us down and sap energy also inhibit the body's ability to heal. These

emotions are like inner weights. They pull inward and downward, and we can feel as if we're living at the bottom of a well with no escape. These include hopelessness, self-pity, loss, and sadness.

In addition, we experience situational responses to pain that develop and establish themselves over time. I think of these as *feeling states*. They have emotional components, but are experienced more as states of being. These include: victimization, powerlessness, isolation, silence, and invisibility.

As a last ditch effort born of the desperation of having no effective avenues of physical healing, I began working with these emotional aspects of living in pain. I figured that if I couldn't heal my body right away, at least I didn't have to be so miserable about the situation I was in.

This began with the simple, but surprisingly difficult practice of acknowledging the deep emotional pain that stemmed from, accompanied, and amplified my physical pain. From this place, I learned to extend compassion to myself. This practice of extending understanding and compassion to myself was more than just a psychological wellness exercise. It was a crucial interior movement that began to create space for real healing and unexpectedly began to relieve my physical pain as well.

HAVING COMPASSION FOR YOURSELF

WHEN WE SPEAK of compassion, we most often refer to it as a feeling we reserve for others: others who are less fortunate, others who have lost someone or something dear to them.

We are rarely encouraged by our religions or philosophies to have tenderness and loving kindness toward ourselves. Yet, it is vital to become our own best friends when we are living in pain.

The first thing to accept about what you are undergoing is that your emotional reactions to your situation are not wrong or unnecessary.

Absolutely nothing is wrong with you for feeling the way you feel. You are not overreacting or oversensitive if you find yourself often in tears, or filled with rage and frustration at what happened or is happening to you. You are not weak, or silly or self-pitying.

It is normal and natural to feel strongly. Something big has happened in your life to cause the degree and tenacity of the pain you are in. It might have been sudden, or it might have developed slowly over time. Either way, the change in your life is real, the pain is real, and your feelings are real.

Having compassion for yourself means allowing yourself to feel the deep emotions that arise from living in pain, and, once you have acknowledged and felt them fully, to let them go.

Besides allowing your strong feelings about your difficult situation, please understand that you are not wrong for *being* in pain. This is so important to understand and to *agree with* within yourself. It is very hard to heal when you are fighting with yourself.

Likewise, remaining in pain for some time does not mean that you are a failure. You are always doing your best. Sometimes that looks like getting up and taking a walk, and sometimes it looks like staying in bed.

Let go of being harsh with yourself and begin to find a way to treat yourself with more gentleness, compassion and genuine love.

Often we find ourselves the hardest to truly love, yet one of the things that pain demands from us if we are to move beyond it, is to find a way to care for ourselves by holding ourselves gently, and seeing ourselves with kinder eyes.