




Why Educating for Alternative Pain Management Instead of Opioids Has Become a Personal Mission

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EDWARDSVILLE - The opioid crisis is a hot button, controversial topic like politics, vaccines and climate change. Everyone has an opinion on what caused them, whether it's a media conspiracy, who is to blame, how to stop it and if they are an effective solution for chronic pain. As I found out recently with my last column, even if you spend weeks researching, interviewing sources and cross-referencing the current statistics, there will still be critics screaming through their keyboards accusing you of spreading false information.

To everyone out there in chronic pain searching for a solution to regain control of their life back, I hear you and empathize with your struggle. Pain at any level is draining physically, emotionally and mentally. Imagine getting up in the morning and immediately feeling so physically terrible that you need to cancel all the activities you planned with your family and friends. Now imagine having to do that on a frequent basis. How guilty and emotionally beat up do you think you would feel? Those of you with chronic pain already understand.

In my bio photo, I show no apparent signs of sickness that would lead anyone to believe I have a chronic illness. But...looks can be deceiving. Every day I still wake up in pain. The severity though is dependent on how well I have controlled my level of stress, diet, and exercise. The weather, unfortunately, I can't control and there are days Mother Nature hears my wrath. Worse than any pain has been the emotional agony I have experienced feeling like a bad mom. I have had to miss planned outings with my daughter or events because mommy "just didn't feel good".

My primary care physician started testing for Lupus, MS, and Fibromyalgia when I was in my early 20's after I experienced a series of migraines that led to stroke-like symptoms. Now at almost 40, doctors have broadly labeled my symptoms as an unnamed autoimmune disease with Fibromyalgia. Honestly, though, I gave up trying to find a label to validate this significant impact on my life. With or without a set diagnosis, I would still experience the same symptoms. My focus shifted from searching for a label to "How can I regain control over my body again?"

Currently, my average day is feeling achy throughout my entire body at a level enough to make the bi-product of anxiety tolerable. There have been other days I have woken up feeling disconnected and the pain level is comparable to the flu. The times when the soreness in my fingers, hands, and feet elevated, my irritability went from annoyed to give me someone to punch in the face. Before I could decrease the flare-ups, I would compare eating to Russian Roulette. Everything ingested would trigger gastrointestinal

issues or nerve reactions. Therefore, bathroom accessibility was always top of my priority list when dining out. On absolute worst days, I experienced brain zaps, my skin felt like it was burning/melting, internal organs felt like they were being punched or stabbed and body parts started going numb. These more painful symptoms were an alarm to warn me that I would have what mimics a stroke on my right side of my body.

Experiencing this daily led me to be incredibly passionate about educating others about the dangers of opioid abuse and the benefits of alternative pain management. For years the only treatment doctors and specialists would prescribe to control my symptoms was a mix of opioids and Cymbalta. And oh how my addictive personality loved opioids. For once, I experienced a span of pain-free days but the trade-off was low energy, irritability, weight gain and feeling like a zombie – all completely counterproductive to keeping up with a toddler and working. When I realized how dependent I had become on opioids, I asked the doctors to take me off and up the Cymbalta. Unfortunately, that plan backfired catastrophically when my body decided to rebel leaving my right kidney a permanent casualty of the withdrawals.

The catalyst for change came when I started working for my boss, Dr. Curtis Baird. His 30+ year knowledge of chiropractic and functional medicine opened my eyes to the benefits of alternative medicine. Being a skeptic to anything new, I consulted with my brother, a highly respected neurosurgeon, about what he felt my options were. Both of them agreed it was time to think outside the box for solutions.

Today, I can happily report that I'm 99% free of prescription medication due to alternative pain management. My body has done well responding to the daily regimen of physician grade supplements to support my injured kidney and manage symptoms. For the rare times when my symptoms are unbearable, I do openly admit to having a prescription for valium. Yet, the biggest insight for me came after seeing a pain psychotherapist to understand what my triggers were and how to control them. Learning to listen to my body was the game changer that led to the biggest breakthrough – nutritional testing. Switching to an anti-inflammatory diet with supplementation has been the most successful path to controlling my symptoms.

The foundation of wellness coaching is based on the fact that everyone's body is different and responds to treatments differently, therefore, care must be tailored. This is why I acknowledge what worked for me, may or may not work for someone else. Understanding that drives me to share my health journey with others. There may be someone out there frustrated with their treatment and looking for an alternative.

Our office's involvement in the Partnership for Drug-Free Communities and the Metro East Recovery Council evolved from that belief. I co-chair the education and prevention work group for the Partnership and sit on both as an expert in alternative pain

management and a wellness advocate. Before I worked in healthcare, I didn't understand how prescription drugs attached to the dopamine receptors in our brain triggering dependency nor did I know the nasty side effects of withdrawing from them. My mission is to not take opioids away from those that need them but to educate on all aspects of pain management. Every person suffering from chronic pain has the right to make an informed choice as opposed to being pushed towards a quick fix for relief that down the road has serious health consequences.