

# Chronic Pain Support

For those who suffer and those who wish to love them well.



*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.*  
*Romans 15:13*

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## LESSON 1: Relational Impact

11% of American adults are dealing with some form of chronic pain.<sup>1</sup> Levels differ, but what's constant for all is the energy drain that accompanies dealing with pain.

Imagine a cell phone battery that never charges above 70% and drains at a faster rate than other phones. How would you prioritize screen time? Would you strategically plan your day around opportunities to recharge?

This is a good starting place to understand how some people with chronic pain manage their days. They decide how to spend their energy reserves and when to recharge. If something unexpected comes up, they may have a harder time dealing with/recovering from the extra expenditure.

The question isn't always whether or not a person feels well enough to do something but what else may be sacrificed in order to make it happen.

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If 11% of all American adults deal with some level of chronic pain, that means 11% of your friends and family are likely affected (while some of you are part of the 11% yourselves).

Bearing this statistic in mind can help us become empathetic friends and companions as well as more effective providers of practical assistance and soul care (topics to which we will return later in the week).

For now, let's consider the ways in which such suffering can affect our relationships.

Because people with chronic pain tire more easily, they're operating under a different dynamic. You may need to adjust your expectations accordingly.

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<sup>1</sup> National Institutes of Health. "NIH analysis shows Americans are in pain." August 11, 2015. <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/nih-analysis-shows-americans-are-pain> (Accessed September 20, 2018).

Because people with chronic pain must pick and choose their activities and decide how to spend their strength most effectively on any given day, their decision-making process may look chaotic or haphazard from the outside. We must bear that in mind and determine ahead of time not to take offense where none is intended.

It's a simple step, but if we don't analyze how chronic pain can impact our relationships, we'll be swept along by the current of life, perhaps never even realizing how assumptions can lead to resentment.

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### **Discussion Questions**

1. Are you aware of those in your life who suffer from chronic pain? If so, how did you first become aware? If not, how might you seek to raise your sensitivity to these issues?
2. If you deal with chronic pain yourself, is your situation something you've communicated clearly to your friends and family? If not, why? If so, is there anything you may need to clarify in order to manage their expectations?
3. How might open lines of communication on these issues pave the way for stronger relationships in the Body of Christ?
4. How might Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8 apply in these situations? ("Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.")

### **For Prayer**

Let's pray that we will open our hearts to one another, seeking to care, humbling ourselves to depend on each other, and learning to bear each other's burdens. May we grow in grace and love.

## LESSON 2: Unreliable Bodies

Symptoms of chronic conditions are often unreliable. People with chronic pain may feel fine some days and not fine others, with no discernible reason for the shift.

This not only makes forward planning difficult, since it's impossible to predict pain levels from day to day, but it also creates confusion for friends and family, who note inconsistencies and wonder what's going on.

Compassion, understanding, and open lines of communication on both sides are key components to healthy relationships in these situations.

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Inconsistencies generally lead to frustration. Think of an electrical cord with a short in it. A car that only starts in certain temperatures. A video streaming service that provides exactly the shows you want whenever you want them--except when the service is glitching.

When the most unreliable element in your life is your own body, the frustration is especially acute. It's a frustration that 11% of our family, friends, and siblings in Christ are dealing with.

In mild to moderate situations, the frustration is manageable. In more severe cases, however, an inability to predict one's condition from day to day can lead to feelings of helplessness, inadequacy, and self-loathing.

In addition to physical pain and emotional strain, such sufferers also experience inordinate guilt. If they can't keep up with housework, take care of family matters, serve in the church in their areas of giftedness, or contribute in recognizable ways within their spheres of influence, they may begin to question their own worth.

This very real and human response to ongoing chronic pain cannot be ignored. It must be watched for, recognized, acknowledged, and addressed with both practical ministry and targeted counsel.

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### **Discussion Questions**

1. In addition to the actual pain, what daily frustrations might chronic pain sufferers deal with that non-sufferers do not?
2. How can we apply Paul's admonition in Galatians 6:2 to these relationships (*Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*)?
3. How can we prayerfully and theologically address feelings of guilt and inadequacy that can plague chronic pain sufferers?

### **For Prayer**

Let's pray that we remain faithful in bearing one another's burdens. Let's seek empathy and wisdom as we speak comfort to those suffering in both body and soul. May the love of Christ compel us.

### LESSON 3: Contradictory Advice

People with chronic pain deal with a lot of advice, much of it unsolicited and contradictory.

Though people mean well and intend to be helpful, it proves frustrating if any mention of pain is met with admonitions to meditate, cut refined sugars, use essential oils, get more sleep, get less sleep, try acupuncture, or go live on a mountain and drink goat's milk.

Unsolicited advice is doubly frustrating when it's offered without knowing the nature of the pain, how long it's been going on, what's been tried, and what treatments have proven effective already.

Of course we should care for one another and do what we can to lighten the load; but the best advice generally comes from those who have suffered similar conditions and can share what's worked for them *or* from those who have taken time to ask lots of good questions first.

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Scripture tells us of the sufferings of Job. I will not recount them here. Sufficed to say that while no one's suffered quite like Jesus, Job might come a close second.

After Job lost his family, his wealth, and his health, his friends came to comfort him. Although they didn't get everything right, their initial response is simply beautiful.

*Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that had come upon him, they came each from his own place... They made an appointment together to come to show him sympathy and comfort him. And when they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him. And they raised their voices and wept, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads toward heaven. And they sat with him on the ground seven*

*days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great. (Job 2:11-13)*

Here's what Job's comforters did well:

- heard of his crisis and responded immediately
- gathered at his side
- wept with him
- sat in silence
- let him mourn

If you've read the rest of the book, you know that for all Job's friends did well, there's something they did very poorly. They gave misguided advice based largely on a flawed theology of suffering.

It's not that we should *never* offer advice or seek to counsel sufferers; however, there are immediate, practical ways to serve whether we know what to say or not.

Compassion, physical presence, weeping with those who weep, and mourning with those who mourn--these are powerful ministries in the face of suffering.

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### Discussion Questions

1. The fear of not knowing what to say to a suffering friend is a real one. How is that fear both legitimate and illegitimate?
2. In what ways might practical responses to suffering help overcome the fear of saying the wrong thing as we reach out to those who are suffering?
3. Where should prayer factor into all of this?

### For Prayer

Let's pray for wisdom and discernment as we pursue practical and prayerful responses to our friends' pain.

## LESSON 4: Empathetic Companionship

People with chronic conditions must decide how much to talk about their conditions and to whom.

Never mentioning it at all is disingenuous and leads to false expectations; however, discussing problems too often or in excruciating detail may lead even the most loving friends and family to experience sympathy fatigue.

Learning to strike a balance is frustrating for some chronic sufferers, and problems on this front can be exacerbated by personality, cultural expectations, temperament, and other individualized factors.

Remember that just because a person keeps showing up and "doing life," that doesn't mean all is well. Many choose to quietly put their heads down and power through difficult days as best they can.

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There are people we need to tell, of course. People who need to understand what's going on with us. Friends, loved ones, church family, employers, and co-workers.

Many will sympathize. Some will even empathize.

None will understand like Jesus.

Not only has no one else suffered quite like Jesus, but no one else can also read our deepest thoughts and emotions. He is the best and most perfect High Priest, able to intercede for us with complete empathy because no matter what valley we're walking through, he's been there.

*Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14-16)*

As the Suffering Servant who has also become the Author and Finisher of our faith, he's the one to whom we turn for mercy and grace to help in time of need.

Whether we're the ones suffering or the ones trying to love our suffering friends well, we all need Jesus.

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### **Discussion Questions**

1. How can reading, study, and meditation on the sufferings of Christ increase our capacity to handle suffering as well as increase our ability to love well our friends who suffer?
2. How can we effectively point our own hearts and the hearts of our suffering friends to Christ?
3. What Scripture passages could help us in this endeavor?

### **For Prayer**

Let's ask the Holy Spirit to help us look to Jesus.

## LESSON 5: Rooted Relationships

There are reasons why people with chronic pain (especially low-to-mid-level pain) might not talk about their issues more often.

First, they may feel that since many others suffer in worse ways, they have no room to complain. Second, they might not want their condition to define them or be forced to deal with questions when out in public and the topic comes up.

They may choose only to share their issues with a small, tight-knit group with whom they've established an understanding and experienced long-term community.

Really, there could be any number of reasons why people with chronic pain keep the matter to themselves. Generally, their desire is simply to get on with life.

The fact that some people are quiet about their pain doesn't mean they're not suffering.

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As you walk away from this course, take these three concepts:

- 1) More people around us are suffering than we know.
- 2) Low-to-mid-level sufferers often suffer in silence.
- 3) High-level and long-term sufferers require unique soul care.

Although many studies of this nature might end with a neat list of steps or recommendations, this one does not.

Personal ministry is rarely that cut and dried.

Yet in many ways, it's so simple.

Your ministry to sufferers should be unique to each one, and in order for that to happen, it must be rooted in relationship. Once you know a sufferer well, your response will be appropriate to the individual.

Let's strive to be prayerfully present, pointing to Jesus.

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### **Discussion Questions**

1. What are my takeaways from this course? How will they affect my actions?
2. Should my approach to caring for my loved ones with chronic pain change? If so, in what ways? If not, why?
3. How can I share what I've learned with my friends, family, and church family?
4. What beneficial perspectives may those with chronic conditions be able to offer the church?

### **For Prayer**

May we all be prayerfully present, pointing others to Jesus.

