

## **CHRONIC ILLNESS: LIVING WITH UNCERTAINTY**

Whenever I think of the threat of acquiring a chronic illness, I think about my canoeing partner Dick, who got cancer but never seemed to miss a beat. He explained to me that he viewed it as a call and an opportunity to do and be all he had aspired to do and be. We all make our own reality.

In general, we human beings like to live with a large measure of certainty, predictability and security in our lives. We feel safer and more comfortable.

One of the consequences of our longer life span is the increasing likelihood that we will develop a chronic illness such as arthritis, asthma, cancer, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, heart disease or stroke. These illnesses don't go away and they ebb and flow so they rob us of certainty. For most of us emotionally frail and fragile human beings, the anxiety and uncertainty of contacting a chronic illness creates an emotional crisis.

An emotional crisis is defined as a period where our normal coping skills are so overwhelmed that we spiral downward into hopelessness, helplessness and despair. Generally, with time and assistance of others we gradually regroup and regain some measure of stability.

During the stabilization period our focus is restructuring our life to accommodate the symptoms that most likely will be permanent. We may become depressed, have difficulty in getting out of bed, and stamping out "automatic negative thoughts" (ANT'S).

Since most of us do not live in a bubble, our chronic illness will reverberate with friends and family members. Some may feel uncomfortable with our chronic illness and avoid us. This highlights the wisdom of staying open and connected with one's spouse, family and friends. Research validates the wisdom of joining a support group tailored to our specific chronic illness.

Some of you may recall Abe Pollin, a prominent Washington, D.C. real estate developer, philanthropist and sports franchise owner. He and his wife, Irene, lost two of their children to early death. They were dissatisfied with the grief counseling they received so Irene wrote a book entitled, Taking Charge: Overcoming the Challenges of Long-Term Illness.

This helpful book addresses the challenges of creating a high quality of life with a productive future while managing your long-term or chronic illness. Irene Pollin succinctly addresses the eight most common fears experienced to varying degrees by people coping with the uncertainty of chronic illness. The eight fears are:

- Fear of loss of control (what if I'm not in charge anymore?)
- Fear of loss of self-image (who will love the weak person I've become?)
- Fear of dependency (how can I bear being such a burden to others?)
- Fear of stigma (will others avoid me?)
- Fear of abandonment (will my love ones leave me?)
- Fear of expressing anger (what if my rage drives others away?)

- Fear of isolation (will I live out my days alone?)
- Fear of death

When we live in fear or crisis we lose our distinctly human abilities from our cerebral cortex to live in self-awareness, to reflect on events and to create a future. We also lose our cerebral processes for loving, caring and nurturing. Our Triune Brain is similar to the earth's geologic layers in that our human brain has evolved over time. We evolved from a reptilian brain to a limbic/mammalian one to our recent cerebral cortex.

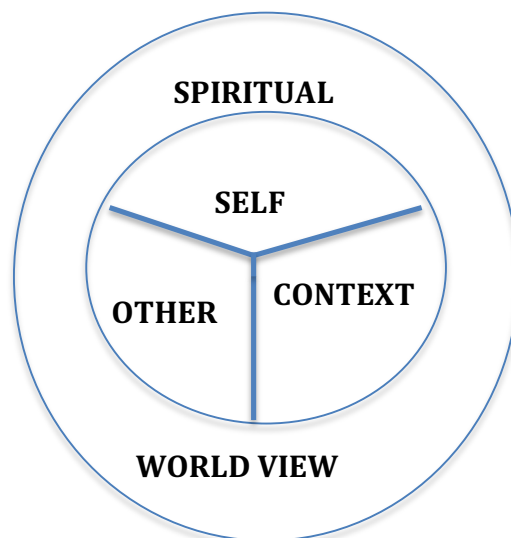
Our reptilian brain is like the brain of reptiles. It regulates autonomic processes to include instinctual reactions (fight, flight or freeze), reflexes and habits. There are no thought processes or any language capability. Reptiles do not care for their young; they lack playfulness.

Our middle or limbic brain contains powerful emotions, sexual instincts, our sense of smell and affective behavior that ensures our emotional responses are influenced by our human relationships. The limbic brain says, "Don't confuse me with facts. They interfere with my emotions!"

When we feel overwhelmed with the impact of our chronic illness, what can we do to stay rooted in our cerebral cortex or higher and newer brain so we retain our capacity for thinking, planning, reflecting, playfulness, insights, creativity and new learning? We know that when we feel threatened, uncertain and anxious, we readily regress to our limbic and reptilian brains.

There are many more answers to this question than we have space to address herein. A comprehensive answer is to assert that healthy or ideal behavior requires complete consideration of the relationships between and among self, other, context or environment, and our values or philosophical and spiritual worldview. How do we achieve this ideal level and integration of awareness?

### **SOCSpTriangle**



We practice **Meditation/Mindfulness**, which results in greater empathy, emotion regulation and stress reduction. In other words, we reconnect with our cerebral neocortex and enjoy greater self-management of the inevitable stressful challenges of living with chronic illness. We work on staying relaxed and letting our energy go into healing. Your local hospital or health plans probably offers meditation/mindfulness courses. Also, visit [www.mindfulschools.org](http://www.mindfulschools.org).

Other benefits of meditation/mindfulness training are:

- Better focus and concentration
- Increased sense of calm
- Decreased stress & anxiety
- Enhanced health
- Improved impulse control
- Increased self-awareness
- Skillful responses to difficult emotions
- Increased empathy and understanding of others
- Development of natural conflict resolution skills

The goal is to build a new sense of meaning in our life and a renewed sense of self. We become aware that there is hope after all. We come to terms with how to care for our physical needs, how far to push ourselves and what we are able to do in the world. We know that we are firmly in control of our life. We are in control of the illness rather than the illness being in control of us.

Little did we know when the chronic illness began that we were presented with an opportunity – an opportunity that could enrich our life. Opportunities come in strange forms. Our challenge is to look for them, recognize them and make them our own. My canoeing partner was a wise man!

*Dr. Jim David is a practicing psychotherapist in Silver Spring, MD, who adheres to balance in all areas of life. Visit his website at [www.askdrdavidnow.com](http://www.askdrdavidnow.com) or email at [james519@comcast.net](mailto:james519@comcast.net)*