

# *Why Don't They Just Take Something?*

One of the first questions that a person asks when we meet someone with a chronic condition is, "What do the doctors say?" You see, when we come across someone who is sick or in pain, we assume the medical community must have a handle on their condition.

Unfortunately, this often leads to thinking that they are still suffering, because they must not be doing what their doctor is telling them to do. After all, modern medicine has come a long way! And, the doctors must have something that can take away the symptoms. Otherwise, the only other explanation is that this person must not be trying very hard to get well!

Often we drill them with questions, like, "Have you tried this?" Or "Have you tried that?" because it just does not make sense that if they really were trying, they would be better by now. It is confusing for us when we meet someone who is in horrible pain or sick. So, we ask ourselves, "Can't they just take a something for it?"

It is true most of us are not accustomed to the idea of illness being chronic. Usually when people get sick, we go to the doctor and then get better. After all, we are way too busy to even think about missing a moment lying in bed... miserable. When we do feel a cold coming on, we cringe and yell, "I don't have TIME to get sick!"

So, we call the doctor, begging for a prescription that will make it all go away and fast! We may only be down for a few hours or maybe even a few days, but we hate every moment of it! We whine and cry to those around us, moan in pain and panic as we watch the clock wasting away our precious time. Nonetheless, soon we are back on our feet and back on track. We quickly forget how horrible it was to have to put things aside, feel terrible and unable to do what we want to do.

Yes, we are a world that is accustomed to popping some pills or vitamins and we are back in the race, feeling like our determination could defeat any viral army. After all, we did not stay sick for long because we acted, had a positive attitude and by gosh "we were not going to let any illness keep us down!"

Conversely, when we meet up with a person who has been sick or injured for months or even years, we often assume they must be lazy or unmotivated, they must not want to work or they must not be doing what their doctor is telling them to do. Otherwise, wouldn't they just take some medicine and get better, just like we did when we were sick? Just about anything is treatable with modern medicine, isn't it?

On the contrary, the truth is that many times the doctors do not even know what to do. Dr. Jeffrey Boyd, a noted physician and author, wrote, "I am beginning to suspect that popular American culture is built upon the pipe dream that disease has been conquered by physicians, or will soon be conquered as soon as we figure out what all that DNA says. I've been a physician now for a quarter century, and let me assure you that is not how it looks from down here in the

trenches. If this were a football game the score would be DISEASE 85 versus DOCTORS 15" (Boyd, 2001, p.xiii).

But what about all of the recent "breakthroughs" in medicine? Aren't we getting a handle on curing diseases and learning how to repair the human body? Well... yes and no. Many experts conclude the amount of people suffering from chronic illness is actually increasing, because of the improvements in medicine in the past two centuries.

"The reason being, with past medical care many people with various illnesses and injuries would not have survived. Today, they are kept alive with drugs, surgeries and treatments. Yet, for many, the improvements have not been sufficient to cure them or make them well enough to live without debilitating symptoms." Dr. Boyd added.

"The fundamental issue is that contemporary medicine is often able to delay death but not restore health, so that the more "breakthroughs of modern medicine" we have, the more sick people we have. I say this without sarcasm and without cynicism" (Boyd, 2001, pp xii-xiii).

In other words, modern medicine may be saving the lives of millions, but many of these people are still left with great limitations. Here is one example of how the medical community has learned how to save someone, but the person is still debilitated:

*In the old days if you had a severe head injury, you died of brain swelling. Starting a couple of decades ago, doctors learned how to prevent brain swelling, so that acute brain damage did not necessarily lead to death. But as a result of that "breakthrough of medicine" there is a large and rapidly growing number of Americans with Traumatic Brain Injury, most of whom are unable to return to the kind of work and lifestyle they had before, and many of whom are permanently disabled. Thus the more successful medicine is, the more sick people we have among us, explained Dr. Boyd (2001, p.xiii).*

Suddenly we have a growing group of people who have chronic illnesses and pain. For many, treatments do help enough for the person to function again, but for others they do not. This leaves millions of people living an entire life ill, in pain, frustrated, searching and at a loss of how to deal with an ongoing disease or injury that may not improve. Yes, most do "take something." In fact, most have gone from doctor to doctor, trying medication after medication. Even for those who do find relief through medications, it is often a long, slow process that can take months or even years to get the right combination.

"Finding the right medication takes time, because patients may exchange one benefit for one condition for a side effect in another," said Dr. Roland Staud, a medical researcher (Liddane, 2001, p.1). Unfortunately, not only do most go through a gamut of medications, tests, procedures, physical therapy and surgeries, many have even tried a number of special diets, supplements and other alternative treatments. For some, their limitations are mild and manageable with medications, treatments, therapies and learning to pace oneself. For some, it takes a huge effort to try to keep up with careers, hobbies, children and housework. For some, it is a great struggle just to get through a day of work or raising kids, with no energy left for

anything else. And, for others, they become disabled, are no longer able to work and it takes all they have just to complete a few daily tasks, wash their hair or go to a doctor's appointment.

They could easily give up, but they keep battling and keep searching for an answer or something that will at least help them to get some of their life back. Many have even fought the face of death and have won! They may still be living with limitations, but they often do not get the credit for the war they did win.

Therefore, isn't it time for our society to realize that people with disabling conditions are not weak and unassertive? Instead, let us recognize their courage and strength for living a life of loss, struggle and perseverance. After all, that is an incredible accomplishment in and of itself that most will never know!

#### REFERENCES:

Boyd, Dr. Jeffrey (2001, January). A Tribute to an American Heroine: Foreword (2002) to "But You LOOK Good: A Guide to Understanding and Encouraging People with Chronic, Debilitating Illness and Pain!"

Liddane, L. (2001, November). *The Orange County Register*.

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