

PARTNER WITH YOUR FAMILY TO HEAL

Forming an Alliance with Your Family Can Help You Eliminate Chronic Pain



"A PERSON IN PAIN WIELDS GREAT POWER WITHIN THE FAMILY."

YOU'RE IN THIS TOGETHER

David Hanscom, MD

When your family hears your footsteps coming up the walk, are they genuinely glad to see you, or are they filled with anxiety? How often do you have fun with your family? Can you honestly say that your home is a safe haven, brimming with warmth and goodwill?

HOW CHRONIC PAIN DAMAGED MY FAMILY

I learned from experience how much damage chronic pain can inflict upon a family. My mother was a chronic pain sufferer, and over time I came to realize that a person in pain wields great power within the family.



Constantly angry, both physically and emotionally abusive, my mother always got her way. If anyone confronted her, she retreated to her room with the excuse that she “did not feel well.” My mother’s pain and her accompanying behavior ruined many family events.

She felt that her physical discomfort gave her license to lash out at anyone, anytime. It was not until I faced my own chronic pain years later and watched how it interfered with my relationships, that I finally came to understand my mother’s behavior.

CHRONIC PAIN IS A FAMILY MATTER

Whether the family is composed of a dozen people or only a couple, chronic pain takes a huge toll. Chronic pain sufferers can forget what it’s like to have fun, and they often isolate themselves from family and close friends. When they do choose to socialize, they often bring the family down by talking nonstop about their medical condition and treatments. As home life deteriorates, the pain sufferer’s feelings of hopelessness can erupt in rage, directed at those who care about them most. Since the problem seems insurmountable, life at home can become toxic and dysfunctional.

The growing family dysfunction in turn generates more anxiety for the patient, amplifying physical pain. As pain continues to bombard the family, the home degenerates into a place where family members feel they are under constant attack, rather than the way they should feel at home: supported and safe.

This downward spiral is common in families where there is chronic pain. However, it can be reversed and your home made a safe haven once again—but only if everyone understands how chronic pain affects families, and how important it is for the patient to make peace with them in order to recover. Knowing how our brains process pain is crucial to understanding the dynamics of pain and the family.



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THE MECHANICS OF CHRONIC PAIN

Acute pain—new pain caused by an injury, inflammation, or disease—lights up circuits in the “acute pain center” (nociceptive area) of the brain. When pain lasts for three months or more, it is considered “chronic” as opposed to “acute.” At this time, the circuits in the acute pain center go quiet, and instead, the emotional area of the brain lights up. As a result, our physical pain and our emotions become physiologically linked. In other words, the patient experiences the same pain, but it’s driven from a different part of the brain—the emotional areas.

Now, emotional reactions to daily stress can trigger or amplify the pain. The pain and emotional regions of the brain are linked. All of this is occurring below our level of conscious awareness. The neuroscientists have a saying, “Neurons that fire together, wire together. No wonder people in chronic pain feel so trapped!”

As most of us know, family members and significant others can easily trigger highly-charged emotions. Such exchanges “fire up” the nervous system and research has shown that pain is consistently worsened in this scenario. Being around family can make the home a minefield for the chronic pain patient – and vice versa.

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BREAKING NEGATIVE FAMILY PATTERNS

In my practice, I have seen many families who are unwilling to support the chronic pain patient who is entering a healing program. It is usually because the chronic pain sufferer unwittingly has become a consistent source of negativity within the family. This is a real problem for the patient; if you understand the close relationship between emotional and physical pain, you can see how important it is to have your family on your side. By creating a positive energy, with or without your pain, a powerful healing environment will be the result.



AS A CHRONIC PAIN SUFFERER, HOW CAN YOU TRANSFORM YOUR FAMILY HOME TO A SAFE HAVEN AGAIN, WHERE FAMILY MEMBERS FREELY OFFER THEIR CARING SUPPORT?

FOLLOW THESE FOUR STEPS:

1. DON'T DISCUSS YOUR PAIN, BUT DO ASK FOR SUPPORT

At the end of my first visit with my patients and their families, I tell the patient, “With the exception of your medical team, do not share your pain with anyone—friends, co-workers, and especially your family.” At this point I usually see surprise on my patient’s face and relief on their family’s. I continue: “I mean it. No complaining about your pain with anyone, and that includes all those grimaces and groans.”

Then I turn to the family. I tell them that if one of them is having a bad day, they mustn’t complain, either. More importantly, they must refrain from asking the patient about pain, as well as discussing it among themselves. Each family member must be responsible for his or her own pain--emotional or physical. Finally, I tell them all: “When you leave this office, I want you to visualize a ten-foot concrete wall between your pain and the rest of the world. It’s off the table now and forever.”

This process sounds simple, but it is far from easy. Complaining is a behavioral pattern that is difficult to break. Most people believe they have a right to complain. But complaining is counter-productive, both for you and whoever is unlucky enough to be listening to you. Not only does complaining about your pain frustrate those around you who feel powerless to help; it actually reinforces the pain circuits in your body that are causing your pain, making them harder to re-route.

Now that you know that complaining hurts both you and those listening to you, why knowingly inflict more pain on yourself and on those who care about you? Stop making your pain center-stage at home. Give your family the gift of restraint when it comes to complaining.

Instead, let those who want to support your healing know how much you appreciate their caring and concern. Enlist their help in making the home environment a more positive, nurturing place for everyone, not only for the pain sufferer. The most effective way to accomplish this is for every adult member of the family (13 or older) to join the chronic pain patient in the Design your Own Care (DOC) process. However, it is important that the family member participates by his or her own choosing. (I describe the DOC process in detail, in my book *Back in Control: A Surgeon’s Roadmap Out of Chronic Pain*; and on my website, backincontrol.com. See the Additional Resources section at the end of this article.)

It is crucial that you review the household “ground rules” with your family, whether or not every member is willing to participate. To accomplish this, I strongly suggest a weekly family meeting that focuses on creating an environment that is safe, supportive, and—most importantly—fun. When pain lives at your house, fun tends to take a back seat.



2. CHECK YOUR NEGATIVE ATTITUDE AT THE DOOR

Your family shouldn't have to brace themselves when you come home, on the chance that you're in an unpleasant mood. I usually tell my chronic pain patients and their families: "When you go home, do not ever bring pain or negativity into the house. If you are in a bad mood, wait until you have calmed down before walking in the door. No exceptions." With even one slip, your family will be on edge, wondering what state of mind you'll be in when you come home.

When you are upset, you have unconsciously fallen into "survival mode," ready for a fight. Remember that arguing is not an effective way to resolve conflict. Each family member must be willing to avoid arguments—and to hold the other person accountable to do the same. However, if an argument is unavoidable, take it outside. Agree to make this a "Rule of Engagement" in your home. Don't allow your living space to become a battleground. (Learn more about this and other such agreements in my blog post, "Protect Your Family from Your Pain." See the Additional Resources section at the end of this article.)

Intend to make your living space a supportive and safe haven for each member of your family. Recall the good times in your relationships and bring that positive energy back into your home.



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3. INCREASE AWARENESS OF YOUR BEHAVIOR AND ITS IMPACT ON OTHERS

During my struggle with chronic pain, I read a remarkable book by David Burns titled *Feeling Good Together*. As a result of Dr. Burns' book, I started observing the impact of my behavior on my family. In particular, I noticed how I set up my wife to react in a way that angered me. Until then, I had always blamed her for my anger, never having considered that I might have initiated the exchange. Since reading the book, though, whenever my wife and I argued I began asking myself, "Did I just do something to trigger her behavior?"

For example, when my wife became irritable and short with me, I would normally think "She is ruining my day" and get angry with her. Then I realized that I may not exactly have been in the best mood in the first place; I may have been a little abrupt, or used a whining tone of voice, or not paid attention to what was going on. Another example is a patient in pain who may not complain verbally, but consistently rubs or touches the painful body part and groans. This "pain behavior" may trigger a negative response in the observer, and perpetuate the cycle.

When a family member triggers negative emotions in you, your stress chemicals kick in. As a result, your “adrenalized” nervous system generates more pain. How do you break the cycle of escalating pain in response to a family member's hurtful behavior? By paying attention to your own words and actions and their effect on others.

Taking responsibility for my anger proved to be the most difficult part of my struggle with chronic pain; blaming the other person for "making me angry" was so much easier. Even though I intellectually knew I incited the behavior, it still felt that the other person had caused it. It's a powerful feeling. But eventually, I came to pay closer attention to my words and behavior, and their effect on other people's feelings. Not only did this practice preserve relationships both inside and outside the family; it also contributed to healing my chronic pain.

Another useful exercise to learn how your behavior affects others is to ask each family member the following questions:

1. How often do I give you advice you didn't ask for? (The hidden message is “You're not good enough the way you are.”)
2. Am I critical of others? (What gives you the right to be that way?)
3. What is your reaction to my criticism? (What do you expect? Would you be that critical of your partner on a first date?)
4. How do I react to criticism? (You probably don't like it any more than they do. Why do you expect others to welcome it?)



**"SEIZE THE OPPORTUNITY
TO WORK THROUGH A
SOLUTION TOGETHER."**

Although the answers you get to these questions may surprise and sober you, the heightened awareness they bring can provide fast relief to a troubled family.

Many of us feel we have the right to vent our frustrations on our families. But the family is not the best place to express negatives emotions—you have to live with your words and cannot take them back.

If endless conflict is damaging your family, seize the opportunity to work through a solution together. The family will most likely become stronger.



- **DON'T DISCUSS YOUR PAIN, BUT DO ASK FOR SUPPORT.**
- **CHECK YOUR NEGATIVE ATTITUDE AT THE DOOR**
- **INCREASE AWARENESS OF YOUR BEHAVIOR AND ITS IMPACT ON OTHERS**
- **REINTRODUCE ENJOYMENT INTO FAMILY LIFE**

4. REINTRODUCE FUN AND ENJOYMENT INTO FAMILY LIFE

As a small-town family physician who often worked one-hundred-hour weeks, my father would nonetheless take the family on a little hike every Saturday afternoon. He taught us how to play ping-pong. He gave us a weekly allowance that we could supplement with small jobs such as mowing the lawn, washing cars, and polishing shoes. These activities served to offset the pain that wracked my family.

The most effective way to break negative family habits is to introduce positive elements into the environment. Surprise your family with activities such as music, art, photographs, games, cooking, sports—anything that engages and uplifts them. It doesn't have to be complicated or expensive.

In combination with the other steps, infusing your family with fun will go a long way to break up destructive patterns and replace them with joyful experiences. Your family will thank you for it, and so will your nervous system, which will reward you by letting up on pain sensations.



SUMMARY

Chronic pain can make family life unbearable, but it doesn't have to. By adopting a few simple strategies, you can transform an agonizing home environment into a safe haven again; restore peace and good times at home; and enlist the support of your family in your healing process. Our team has observed that the family dynamics will block progress, flipping them around has been the most powerful force in helping people heal quickly.

REFERENCES

1. Burns, JW, et al. *Temporal associations between spouse criticism/ hostility and pain among patients with chronic pain: A within-couple daily diary study.* Pain (2103); 154: 2715-2721.
2. Burns, David D., M.D.. *Feeling good together: The secret to making troubled relationships work.* Harmony Books, 2010.
3. Hashmi, J. A. et al. (2013) *Shape shifting pain: Chronification of back pain shifts brain representation from nociceptive to emotional circuits.* Brain.136: 2751-68.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS:

Hanscom, David, M.D. *Back in control: A surgeon's roadmap out of chronic pain*, 2nd edition. Vertus Press, 2017.

Sarna, John. *Healing back pain: The mind-body connection.* Warner Books, 1991.

BACK IN CONTROL BLOG POSTS:

www.backincontrol.com

"Pain=Anger=Abuse"

"Healing begins at home"

"Anger is only destructive"

"Begin your healing journey at home"

"Protect your family from your pain"

BACK IN CONTROL RADIO PODCASTS

www.backincontrol.com:

"Mirror neurons—Family healing"

"The chronic pain marriage-go-round"

"Social isolation and chronic pain"

