

Rethinking Chronic Illness One Moment at a Time

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As the health care debate rages on, so much of it hinges on the diagnosis of "chronic" illness. The label, the stigma and the prophesy it foretells can often cause more problems than whatever was being diagnosed. Attention shifts the present uncomfortableness to a future of doom. While we would all agree about getting the care to the people that need it, we might also ask ourselves if the label of "chronic" is really appropriate to begin with.

Chinese medicine, with its focus on the present moment and attention to the natural fluctuations of *qi* in the body, is incredible at helping people break the attachment to what is said will be their ongoing, perpetual illness. When patients come in for treatment, especially for their pain, the conversation often goes like this:

"How long have you had your back pain?"

"It is chronic. I have terrible pain all the time. My doctors say I have that sciatic nerve pain and it might never go completely away."

"Are you in pain right now? If so, how intense is it?"

"Well, I don't have any pain right now. In fact, today is pretty good."

"I want to make sure I understood you correctly. You said that you are in terrible pain all the time and that it is chronic? Is today unusual?"

"Well, it's not exactly all the time. Usually the afternoons are fine. But the mornings are very painful getting out of bed and when I get home from work, the pain also seems to be bad. But when it's bad, it is bad. I don't know if I'll ever feel better."

Without going any further with the intake, the patient has shown one of the biggest perils of ongoing illness. In focusing on intensity and a diagnosis of chronic, they ignore moments of feeling good. Being diagnosed with chronic illness does not mean that all hope is lost. If there are moments when the body feels better, or in this case pain free, your body still has the capacity to heal.

We have to build on those moments, one at a time, to improve our future health. When the pain gets intense, or the disease shakes up our lifestyle, we often forget about the times when we feel good because we are so worried about the next time we may feel awful.

Chronic or acute illness, with improvement, remission or cure, all have one thing in common. Despite illusions to the contrary, they happen one moment after another. The healthiest choice we can make is to experience each moment consciously and spontaneously. When we are focused on the present, the entire idea of chronic does not exist. In any particular moment with conscious living, we are no longer

concerned with what has come before or what is going to happen in the future.

Various historical and medical traditions have championed the importance of living in the present moment. Chinese medicine, with its roots in Taoism and *yin/yang* theory is perhaps the best example of this. As acupuncturists and herbalists, we are constantly focusing on treating what we see in the present moment. Each moment, new cells are being generated, *qi* fueled by different air and food is being created and moved, neurons are firing, weather is changing, and our energy bristles with potential. As practitioners, we sometimes have to remind new patients of this. Sometimes patients return after a treatment of any kind (massage, acupuncture, cortisone injection, chiropractic adjustment, etc) and they say, "It didn't work. I felt better for two _____ (hours, days, weeks, etc.) but then my pain came back just as before." Restoring health for even two minutes is a powerful demonstration that their body can still feel better. Focusing on the present moment, and enjoying those moments when possible, is the building block for creating even more moments of health and wellness.

"Chronic" goes against the entire philosophy of conscious, present living. We create the health we desire with a choice to live every moment. Giving ourselves a chance to reclaim one moment after another invites in health and peace, and the opportunity to feel much better than we ever imagined.

JULY 2010