BONUS CHAPTER:

Food for Pain Relief

Eating is important. If you don't eat you die. However, you may be eating pro-inflammatory foods right now that are increasing your pain. Other foods are anti-inflammatory and these will naturally decrease your pain.

The interesting thing about inflammation is it forms the basis of many of the diseases of our civilisation. Not only does inflammation cause pain but it also contributes to heart disease, asthma, and allergy. It's the underlying process in all the degenerative conditions in our body, including ageing. So anything you can eat that reduces inflammation in your body is incredibly helpful.

Nowadays, diet has become a minefield of conflicting information. And it changes all the time. I remember when fats were bad, then good, then bad, then protein was bad, then sugar – and on and on. In the presence of confusion, most people opt to just keep doing what they've always done.

To make it simple for you – so you can easily improve your diet for pain relief – here's rule #1: All you need to do is eat the kind of food your grandmother used to eat. That's the main objective.

This means no highly-processed foods. Eat your greens; meat one to two times a week (if you eat meat), and eat as many coloured vegetables as possible – they're rich in antioxidants and anti-inflammatories. When you reduce meats (especially processed meats), replace it with fish. This means you get Omega 3 fatty acids in fish oil – a great source of anti-inflammatories.

Eat less simple carbohydrates like sugar and white bread. The simplest rule of thumb is to cut out anything white from your diet. Your energy will be more stable, and it helps with weight loss as well.

Anti-inflammatory foods to increase intake:

- Tomatoes, beetroots
- Tumeric and ginger
- Olive oil
- Green leafy vegetables such as spinach, kale, and collards
- Nuts like almonds and walnuts
- Fatty fish such as salmon, mackerel, tuna, and sardines
- Fruits, including strawberries, blueberries, cherries, and oranges

Inflammatory foods to avoid or decrease your intake:

- Coffee
- Sugar
- White flour (and products with high concentration of white flour like cakes and white bread)
- Hydrogenated and trans fats found in margarine, shortening, and lard
- Fried foods
- Alcohol
- Dairy

One of the big complaints of people in chronic pain is the 'brain fog' they feel. Brain fog means they can't think clearly, and it often comes with huge energy crashes. What many people miss is how this can be hugely affected by how you eat. The medical term for this is symptomatic hypoglycaemia, or what's called a labile glucose metabolism. What people experience in this cycle is a roller coaster of energy surges and crashes that leave you feeling exhausted, unwell, and unable to think straight.

Here's why this happens. The first thing to know is glucose is brain food. Your brain has very precise needs. It requires a constant oxygen supply and a constant glucose supply. The glucose cannot drop below or above a narrow range.

There are many factors in your body that will push up the glucose and only one that will bring the glucose down. One of the factors that pushes up glucose is when you eat a high-glycaemic index food. Glucose has a glycaemic index of 100 and all foods can be measured as compared with pure glucose. A high-glycaemic index food is a simple carbohydrate – like sugar or white bread.

High-glycaemic index foods rapidly push your blood glucose above the range your brain is happy with. This makes your blood more viscous – like syrup. And in turn this affects your brain. It will make you feel sluggish and drowsy. You've probably felt like this after a big meal; your blood is syrup and all you can think is, I want to go and lie down.

When this happens, your brain sends a message to the pancreas to make large amounts of insulin. Insulin is the only way your body can decrease the level of sugar in your blood.

Within twenty to thirty minutes your blood sugar will return to the normal range. However, what often happens is because your blood sugar originally shot up so quickly, you produce too much insulin. This causes your blood sugar level to now go too low. When this occurs you're in trouble because your brain is not getting enough glucose to function properly.

Your brain sends a frantic message to your body to say: "Get the blood glucose up", and so your body turns on stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline. These push your glucose level back up again. But this makes you will feel anxious, shaky, and unwell. You won't be able to concentrate because you are now hypoglycaemic. Before long you will have a craving for something sweet.

You quickly learn that to feel better, you need to have lolly or another high-glycaemic index food like cake of a soft drink that's loaded with sugar.

Within minutes you'll feel great, but really what's happening is your blood sugar is shooting up too fast. To conclude the cycle, you'll become hyperglycaemic again, (too much sugar) feel sleepy… and it all begins again.

This sugary yo-yo means your glucose levels are going up for a short while (when you feel okay) then you get really sleepy and sugar levels are flying down. Then you're feeling anxious and shaky while your body tries to equalise – and round and round you go. You get swings not only in blood sugar but in energy and mood.

The cycle is essentially unstable and the things you do to try and make yourself feel better only feed it. This instability winds your pain system up and causes more pain.

Another problem with this cycle is that making too much insulin causes fat to get laid down in your body. People with insulin levels that are too high have hyperinsulinemia. This means they will lay down fat more easily. Insulin also increases inflammation, which increases pain and heart disease.

This is a fundamental metabolic problem most people with chronic pain simply don't know about. When they go to their doctor and say, "I have these horrible energy swings", the first thing doctors do is check for diabetes.
To do this, you need to fast overnight. So your sugar will end up at the bottom of the range (very low) and you'll be told, "You don't have diabetes." But the hypoglycaemia is missed, and you still have to cope with energy swings.

The answer to this problem is to stay away from all simple carbohydrates. This means you don't eat any food with a glycaemic index above sixty. Check www.GlycemicIndex.com for the glycaemic index of foods.

This seems like a small and insignificant change to improve a serious problem like chronic pain. For people who are caught in this cycle though, the results can be life changing.

Cheryl was a young lady in her early twenties. She had a history of endometriosis and widespread chronic pain. She'd been given a diagnosis of fibromyalgia by a rheumatologist. The pain she suffered was all over her body – a complex central pain problem. She'd tried many of the drugs used for fibromyalgia and had reacted badly to them all.

She was depressed, overweight, and when we talked it turned out a huge part of her distress was caused by massive swings in mood and energy. These moods swings had not been helped by antidepressant medication – it made them worse.

We looked in detail at her eating patterns. To function throughout the day she would drink bottles of red bull (a sugary and caffeinated energy drink), and carried lollies around with her. This was what she survived on.

At the time she was referred to me because I had been trialling a very complicated regime for treating fibromyalgia. I said to her, "Before we this start this very complicated treatment, why don't we just change how you eat?"

The secret to breaking the hypoglycaemia cycle is to have small meals of protein and oils. This means nuts, wholemeal bread (the type that if you were to drop it on your toe you know all about it), fish and vegetable oils. It means largely staying away from carbohydrates.

Cheryl swapped the lollies she carried around for nuts. She started her morning with a solid breakfast of protein and slow-release carbohydrates.

Because glucose is so important, your body can just about make glucose from anything. You never have to worry about a glucose shortage even if you eat a slow carb and protein diet. When you have protein your body will make glucose but slower, using a process called gluconeogenesis.

This was exactly what Cheryl needed. She got away from the excitement of zipping up and down the glucose roller coaster. She now had glucose levels that drifted along slowly in the normal range.

She did this diet for two weeks and when I next saw her I said, "Okay, now we can look at the complicated regime you came to me for."

She said, "I feel completely different. My mood is great. I feel positive and my pain has virtually gone." She even looked different.

Over the next few months Cheryl stayed on this diet and lost weight. The pain that had been ascribed to fibromyalgia melted away, her mood improved and she was a different person.

So symptomatic hypoglycaemia can be a serious problem that flies under the radar. Once you recognise it the treatment is simple and can be life transforming.