The Second Arrow

This is a concept from Buddhism. It says that pain is universal but suffering is optional.

With your new understanding of the pain system you now know you feel physical pain in your body when a pain message arrives in your brain. This purely physical process is what the Buddhists call the first arrow.

However, there is a second arrow. This second arrow is your reaction to the pain message. It is the story and emotion you add when you feel pain. Often this is much more serious and harmful than the first arrow. It is the main reason for suffering, and can prolong chronic pain because strong negative emotions increase the amount and duration of the pain you feel.

Jean was a worried-looking lady in her mid-50s whom I saw at my pain clinic. She had a long history of a strange pain in the right side of her pelvis. Previously we had gone through a long and involved consultation where she explained virtually from birth all the problems she'd had. She'd seen many other practitioners in her search to end her pain. I examined her and said we needed to do a MRI to look in greater detail at the structures in her pelvis. The MRI came back completely normal.

She broke into tears and in between the sobs she said, "My favourite uncle had a pain just like mine and he complained for a number of years but no one really listened. They then found a cancer and it was too late. I have been convinced that I have a 'The big C.'"

We discussed that the pain she felt – the first arrow – was really only a small part of the suffering she was going through. The second arrow was the constant fear that she had a hidden cancer just like her favourite uncle. This had caused the main part of her suffering. She had been so afraid she couldn't even say the word 'cancer', saying 'The Big C' instead.

Once she had confronted her fear and brought it out into the light of day, Jean felt differently about the pain in her pelvis. She practised an ancient Buddhist technique where she visualised the air she breathed as a beautiful glowing healing substance. She practised breathing health into her pelvis, and the next time I saw her, the pain had gone.

Pain is inevitable, but suffering is optional. With chronic pain, reducing your suffering also reduces your pain and breaks the chronic pain cycle.

The key is to recognise these two arrows. Learn to distinguish between them so you can eliminate the second arrow. To do this you need to become The Observer inside your mind. As the pain arrives, you notice it and then (in this tiny moment in time) you note the story and emotion attached to the pain.

When you are aware, you will see this very clearly. Remember, the story and emotion are your creation, so it is something you have power over. Once you see it, you can examine the second arrow. You can pull it out, turn it over and you can shine light on it from any angle you like. Then you can judge whether your emotion and the story behind it is accurate and helpful.

Most of the time it isn't, and the second arrow you've created is causing you unnecessary suffering. Seeing it takes away its power over you, and you can now decide on a better story and emotion to move forward.

As with all mind-body techniques, in the beginning this may be difficult, but with practice and determination you'll learn how to do it wonderfully well. When I had chronic pain I would get sudden, very painful stabs of pain in my back. They would last perhaps a few seconds. But the emotional fallout from this would persist much longer.

By refusing to take part in the aftermath, I gained a feeling of control over my pain, and it didn't bother me as much. And, over time, this also reduced the intensity of the pain I felt. If you remember back to Chapter 2 chronic pain becomes intertwined with the emotional centres in your brain. Taking away the emotional response to the pain reduces the driving power behind it.