Finding Peace in Pain - The Sherry Oxford Story

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Guest: Sherry Oxford

Resources:

# Welcome to Peaceful Life Radio

Hello everyone and welcome to Peaceful Life Radio. This is David Lowry and with me today is Don Drew. How are you, Don?

I'm doing great. Really looking forward to hearing from Sherry.

Yes, today we have Sherry Oxford, a special friend of ours.

# Introducing Sherry Oxford: A Nurse's Journey

Sherry is a nurse and she's worked with people in hospitals for a career and has seen people at their best times, their worst times and times of trial, and we're going to talk with her today. It's going to be a great show.

David, before we start, let's remind our listeners to please download, listen, and share our podcast. It will help us out a lot.

Sherry, welcome to our program.

Hi. Hello to both of you. I've long admired each of you, and I believe we share some common thoughts about peace, inner peace, and promoting social harmony.

We're so glad that you're on our program. Sherry, why don't you tell us about your background as a nurse and working in healthcare?

Yes, I have a BSN in nursing, and an MED in gerontology. I've recently retired. I knew I wanted to work in a healing profession since I was a little girl and was able to do that for 45 years. I worked for years as a labor and delivery nurse, then 10 years as a psychiatric nurse, then in rehabilitation working with patients who had strokes, head injuries, spinal cord injuries, and hip and knee replacements.

# Sherry's Personal Battle with Chronic Pain

When you ask about my chronic pain, I feel like my own experience has been nowhere near that of patients I've cared for through the years. My own physical pain has only been a duration of about nine months so far.

Why don't you tell us a bit about that pain for just a moment. What happened?

What started everything was I had a back surgery because I was having electric shooting pains down my legs making my legs give out, and after about four months, I went to a neurosurgeon. I also have numbness from my right hip all the way down to the tip of my toes, which causes some balance problems. So, he suggested an initial surgery to decompress the nerve that was causing that shooting pain down my back.

Now you, the nurse, are beginning to experience some of these pains that you've been helping people with over the years. And I guess that's different to be on this side of the fence, isn't it?

It's very different.

Sherry, this is a recent physical issue, but certainly you've had physical challenges over the years.

## The Emotional and Physical Demands of Nursing

What were some of the most challenging aspects of your nursing career?

Yeah, nursing is a fast paced, physically demanding job, many times being required to work double shifts of 16 hours without much sleep or rest in between. And time takes its toll on your back and your hips and your knees and your feet.

That, job requires mental acuity and critical thinking and sometimes quick decision making and a willingness to get your hands dirty. A nurse cannot be averse to dealing with poop, pee, or vomit. But I'm so glad that you also asked about the emotional demands of the profession. A nurse often encounters a patient at their worst, most vulnerable time, physically and emotionally.

A good nurse, I believe, should be equipped with the right skill set to include being able to carry out the physical and technical aspects of patient care, but almost as important, the caring, kindness, patience. Empathy, and healing presence involved in the holistic care of a patient and their family.

Thinking back, my own most challenging demands were caring for mothers and fathers experiencing stillbirth, and when I worked in psychiatry, families coping with suicide. There's a healing art of stepping past a strictly patient nurse professional relationship and entering a spiritual space with them where your common humanity provides such comfort.

I would say that I'm comfortable with death as a part of life and so many folks are so scared of it. My coping strategies had more to do with being in the presence of family members with so much emotional pain, then going home to my family and letting that go

so I could have the energy to be a nurturing mother and wife.

I'm not sure I was always at my best. It's inevitable to bring some of that dark energy home sometimes. I think the most important thing is just being aware of it. Some coping strategies seem so simple on the surface. Getting enough sleep, physical exercise and nutrition, recreation, and feeding yourself spiritually for one thing. Surrounding yourself with friends and family who are supportive and avoiding drama in relationships are important.

## Transitioning from Caregiver to Patient

Over this last year, you've had to go through a transition from being a caregiver with all of this that you've been talking about to actually becoming a patient yourself with chronic pain. How has this affected your mindset and outlook on life? Did it alter your peace of mind?

Well, I consider myself to be a pretty calm person, but boy, is it a different story when the tables are turned and I became the patient. I find myself getting impatient with the healthcare system, and specifically with caregivers who are not invested.

I would say that it has affected my mindset by causing me to become an unabashed advocate for my own health care, insisting that I be heard and that I get appropriate treatment. It also makes me worried that so many older or uneducated patients are unable to navigate the health care system, which is so different now than it was even 25 years ago.

I'm a little embarrassed to admit that it did briefly alter my peace of mind until I decided that it was counterproductive and I altered my approach to becoming more proactive in getting my needs met.

That's important to do. I was sympathizing with you as you talked about becoming a patient yourself and the frustrations you have with the medical establishment. So many people are at a time in their life where they have so little energy they can give they're just exhausted. And yet, there's this whole layer of things they have to face not only seeking the right physical care, but also navigating health insurance. Sometimes patients have very little energy to do those things. What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in adjusting to your new reality mental or spiritual, or anything you wanna talk about?

Oh gosh. This is a big one. Anyone who knows me well knows that I am a fiercely independent woman. I live on two acres by myself and have taken care of it, and my house, and my car, and everything else for 39 years, and raised two boys who are now 44 and 46 years old, and now living thousands of miles away from me.

# Embracing a New Reality: Life with Chronic Pain

The biggest challenge for me was to admit that I needed help and could no longer physically do it by myself any longer. Just last month, I hired someone to take care of the yard, and a housekeeper because of my physical limitations. This is a huge reckoning for me, and a real shift in the way I go about my life.

The biggest mental challenge was in accepting this new reality. I thrive on quiet and solitude, and one of the things that brings me the greatest joy is connecting with nature, and tending to my native wildflower beds, and providing food, water, and housing for the many birds and nectaring bees and butterflies who share their space with me.

My two acres have been designated a certified wildlife habitation by the National Wildlife Federation. So, this has been my way of life for many years and feeds my soul. So this shift has been an emotional challenge indeed. I'm having to turn over my mothering of the land and creatures to others.

# Finding Peace and Coping Strategies

Sherry, many of our listeners might be interested in hearing more about the strategies and techniques you've learned both to manage your pain and at the same time maintain a sense of peace and well being.

I did some self searching about my alternatives as I age and what they might look like for me. Different people want different things and require different kinds of living situations. For me, it's very important to age in place. To stay in this place that has been my home, my sacred space, my sanctuary for 44 years. This place where I have an intimate connection with the soil, the countless flowers and shrubs and trees that I've spent a lifetime nurturing and where I raised my two sons. So many memories! And did I mention the quiet? It's my little piece of heaven, my refuge. So, to avoid going to assisted living, and to maintain some semblance of independence and a sense of well being, I decided that for me, I could live with a compromise of hiring lawn and house care and staying in the place that I love. Thank God I have the resources to make that happen. I know that many folks don't have that as an option.

# The Power of Support Systems

Sherry, tell us about your support system, whether it's family, friends, or healthcare providers,

Well, first, on a lighter note, it's not just people who walk this journey with us. We must give some credit to our pets and other animals with non human souls who are a great source of comfort and companionship. Aside from the wildlife on my acreage, which I'm thrilled to be sharing space with, I have three hens, Oakley, Weedo, and Mrs. Claus. And lest you think I'm crazy, they were named by my grandchildren.

Sure they were.

The emotional benefits of pet therapy have long been studied and documented. I spend time with my girls every day, letting them out of their run to free range while I sit in a lawn chair. I sing to them, and they carry on lengthy conversations with me and provide me with the gift of fresh eggs every day.

Now, to address the human beings who are so dear to me, I have the great privilege of living in a small neighborhood out in the country where we all live on two acre lots. My neighbors are like family because we have all lived there for so many years. We watch out for each other, water gardens, borrow cups of flour, check up when a house alarm goes off, attend weddings, graduations, and funerals of our family members, bring casseroles when somebody is sick, and we care for each other in a million ways. The love is self evident.

I didn't mention that I had surgery on my right knee a few weeks ago for a large meniscus tear, and here came the neighbors to my aid. One with an ice pack, another with fresh asparagus from her garden. Another to take my trash bins up the road. I also have three siblings who live in the same town who drove me to the hospital for surgery, stayed overnight with me while I was in an anesthesia induced fog, loaned me a walker, called every day to check on me, and picked up things for me at the grocery store until I could drive.

My church family is invaluable. They hold me in prayer, send cards, visit, and call on the phone offering any assistance I might need. I know I could call on a number of these friends at any hour of the day or night.

You know, sometimes we find ourselves in a family of origin or with acquaintances who are toxic and who create negative energy and emotionally draining drama. I've discovered that this is a choice. And that we can choose to surround ourselves with healthy relationships that are supportive and loving. Look for those qualities in friends that you can invest in. Qualities that are good, and honest, and trustworthy, and affirming, and reciprocal. And then, be ready to be that friend.

# Alternative Therapies and Gratitude Practice

Sherry, have you had any alternative or complementary therapies like meditation or acupuncture or maybe a few other things?

Well, I have a practice of waking up in the morning and lying in bed thinking of all the people and things that I'm grateful for. I have the luxury of being newly retired, so sometimes this takes from 30 minutes to an hour, depending on world events or my personal situation. Sometimes this may include being grateful that there are no bombs destroying homes in my neighborhood. Being grateful for health care. Thinking about people a hundred years ago who would have no alternatives to injuries and illnesses,

and even now in third world countries who don't have access to clean drinking water, antibiotics, dental care, food, education, and so on. It puts a different perspective on my ailments and challenges.

Also, I believe in the positive power of therapeutic touch. I practiced it daily on the patients in my care, without them even being aware of it, and have been the recipient when a few weeks ago, I was in the office of my family doctor, and I was crying with knee pain from my torn meniscus and feeling very discouraged. Before leaving the exam room, she said to me, *Can I give you a hug?* That human connection, that display of empathy, that soul to soul expression of concern, made a world of difference to this strong, independent, self sufficient woman who had been reduced to tears.

Sherry, you were just talking about perspectives and empathy. Healthcare professionals? You talked about all the difficulties and challenges they face in their work.

## Advice for Healthcare Professionals and Others

What advice might you give them who might be struggling with their own health challenges and peace of mind?

I have a vivid memory about a week after back surgery when I was awakened in the early morning with a full bladder and an urgent need to get to the bathroom. I gingerly sat on the side of the bed knowing that nothing was going to happen quickly because I was moving so slowly. To my shock, I found that I could neither stand nor walk because of the pain, and I had a meltdown right there. I sat there sobbing for half an hour, both from severe pain, outrage that my body was betraying me, and catastrophizing that I would be in a wheelchair for the rest of my life. After about 30 minutes, I was able to limp to the bathroom. I sat there on that stupid toilet seat for a long while, taking inventory of my situation and coming to grips with handling things one day at a time and not what horrible things might happen. I read once about 80 percent of the things that we worry about never come to pass. And I'm sure that most of you are familiar with the serenity prayer. Part of it says, *Grant me the serenity to accept things I cannot change, the courage to change things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.*

Wow. What a story. It must have been hard to face that.

## Sherry's Perspective on Life, Pain, and Productivity

So, how has your perspective on life and your priorities shifted since you've had to deal with this newfound chronic pain?

Well, David, for years, I've had a thought provoking sentiment in a frame in my dining room where I see it every day. It says *there is no such thing as a problem without a gift for you in its hand.* I want to say that again because it's been so meaningful to me.

*There's no such thing as a problem without a gift for you in its hand.* So, after in countering life with its many challenges, this one being only the latest, I contemplate the question What *is the gift here? What is the lesson to learn?*

Sometimes it takes me a while to learn the lesson or to see the gift. It feels like this gift has been to be on the receiving end of needing help. And the lesson has been, and is, to feel more compassion. and understanding and patience for folks who are in my situation. Perhaps I couldn't have learned any other way. It's been a sacred lesson to teach me about understanding the pain of others. The gift may be finding meaning and purpose from this problem.

I am more acutely aware that nobody exits this life unscathed, and everyone will be brought to their knees by something. There will be cries from within that cannot be ignored. I think we often live our lives pretending otherwise.

David, I've got a related question to what you just asked.

# The Role of Faith in Coping with Pain

What role has your faith or spirituality played, if any, in helping you cope?

Well, I know that this life and the physical and emotional pain we experience are temporary. No one really knows what happens to our spirits after we die, but I'm comforted by believing that our souls are eternal and live on after this physical body and all its frailties have been left behind. There will be an end to this current suffering and that gives me hope. I believe that a Divine being loves and cares for me just as that being cares for the sparrows in my yard.

I held my brother's hand two weeks ago as he took his last breath. He died painfully with pancreatic cancer. It was anguishing to watch him struggle to breathe near the end, but such a relief when his physical life ended. I believe that his spirit left his body and went back to his creator. This faith has made me unafraid of death and also curious and excited to find out what happens next.

It's a comfort. Knowing this pain will not last forever. My faith community is a vital part of my spiritual walk and I've been going to the same church now for 39 years. It's a place of mutual support where I'm surrounded by goodness and wisdom, acceptance, love. Inclusiveness, safety, questioning, and precious friendships. Friends who, like me, are asking the big questions and grappling with life's challenges together.

Have you had any stigmas or misunderstandings from others about the nature of your pain?

Well, I suspect that anyone with chronic pain has felt that people in their circle experience compassion fatigue after their illness goes on and on. And after a while, they just want you to get over it, much the same way as some people expect those in grief to

get happy after a certain period. But pain and grief have their own timetable.

I know as a nurse, the healthcare system encounters patients who are drug seeking and don't really need medication for physical pain. So many people suffer with drug addiction that I think the lines get blurry as to true need. People can be quick to judge and discount actual physical disability or ability. I myself am not taking any narcotics now, but I can still sense that some question my physical limitations. When I was younger, this would probably have caused me to worry about what they were thinking. But I've long since learned that I have no control over what others think, and it no longer affects my inner peace.

Sherry, if there's one thing I know about you, you're a doer. You've been faced with for the last nine months with some very specific pain and health concerns. How are you balancing this need for self care with your very real desire to maintain a sense of purpose and productivity in your life?

Well, I've learned to respect my body and the warnings it gives me when I overdo. I've learned that no matter how much I used to do, and no matter what I want to do, I will pay a high price if I do certain things. My back will object if I lift heavy things or twist or bend over to pick up something off the floor or pull weeds. My knees will scream if I climb stairs. I've learned to accept these things that I cannot change. I've learned that I must take breaks to improve my quality of life. There are many more things that I can do than things I cannot do, and the problems don't seem so overwhelming if you're rested.

What advice would you give to someone who's newly diagnosed with a chronic pain condition or struggling with some health condition and seeking a new footing in life?

Well, this may sound trite, but I would tell that person to be patient. Our bodies and minds are all different and unique, and we don't all respond or heal on the same timeline, even having the same surgery or injury. It takes much longer, for example, the older we are, and the more comorbidities we might have. I've always been very strong and healthy and was shocked to discover that my timeline and expectation of recovery was much different than what is actually happening. Be patient. Allow your body to heal on its own good time.

Can you share any specific coping mechanisms or mindfulness techniques that may have been particularly helpful to you in managing your pain and maintaining a positive outlook?

I would say to try to put things in perspective. Another way of saying think positive thoughts was written back in the 1300s by a mystic named Julian of Norwich. I have one of her quotes framed also, and it runs through my heart from time to time. She said, *All is well, and all shall be well. And all manner of things shall be well.* I believe that.

Have you come up with a way of enjoying small moments of time where you can celebrate small victories.

Sure. Sometimes I think about those who are always looking for the good. Those people are accused of chasing after unicorns and rainbows or being a Pollyanna, the little girl who always tried to be glad about something, even in dire circumstances. Well, I myself have adopted this approach. When my pain was a nine on the one to ten pain scale, I found myself glad that I had a prescription pain pill.

It's cause for celebration when out of the blue I capture an hour of being pain free. I tend to agree with one of my favorite authors, Wendell Berry, the American novelist and poet, who said, *Be joyful, though you have considered all the facts.* It brings me great joy when friends treat me like the old Sherry and engage me in stimulating and intellectual conversation instead of defining me by my surgeries or limitations.

And a few days ago, I was seized with spring fever and had to plant something in the ground, even if only in pots that I could manage while sitting in a lawn chair. So, I hobbled into Ace Hardware with my cane and got some begonias and impatience. By the time I got to the cash register, I was on my last ounce of reserve, and feeling pretty clammy and shaky because I'd been standing for too long. That old, familiar throbbing in my lower back and hip and knee were demanding my attention, and I was feeling pretty sorry for myself when, standing right front of me, the lesson came. There was a young woman in her thirties, wearing shorts. And a full leg prosthesis. And I was overwhelmed with gratitude for my two imperfect legs. The gifts are all around us if we but have the eyes and hearts to see them.

# Concluding Thoughts and Messages of Hope

Sherry, as our time is coming to a close David and I want to thank you for being with us here today. I know it was a challenge and we are so grateful for your time with us.

What message of hope or encouragement would you like to share with our listeners who may be facing their own health crises?

Well, there's two things. One, I've stumbled upon an elusive, mystical healing that takes place when I stop focusing on myself and do something good for someone else. When I write a card and mail it to someone going through a divorce. When I offer words of encouragement to a friend struggling with parenting. When I take a meal to a friend after surgery. When I call a family member to say, I support you in your decision. It imparts two blessings. I am blessed by providing a balm in their time of need. And they blessed by having their load lightened.

Or when I mindfully provide healing touch with an arm around his shoulder for someone who's feeling alone. Lastly, I'll share with you these final words of hope and encouragement that have been so meaningful to me, written by St. Francis de Sales. He said, *Do not look forward to what might happen next. The same everlasting Father who cares for you today will take care of you tomorrow and every day. Either he will shield you from suffering, or he will give you unfailing strength to bear it. Be at peace*

*then, and put aside all anxious thoughts and imaginations.*

Sherry, thank you for being with us today. It's been wonderful to hear your perspective on life and living with pain. We thank you for your years of service as a nurse and for all the comfort you gave people during those 40 years of nursing. And we thank you for giving us hope for those who experienced pain and suffering and finding inner peace by hearing about your situation.