



# A Picture of Pain: What Life is Really Like with Chronic Pain

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Almost everyone has experienced some type of acute, or temporary, pain in their lives. Acute pain is a protective response to tissue injury that typically resolves with the healing process and lasts less than three months. However, for one in five people around the world, their pain persists for longer than three months and is considered chronic. ,

Some people may suffer from diseases or disorders that cause their chronic pain, while others may have an injury or accident that causes long-term or permanent pain. Regardless of its source, chronic pain can disrupt nearly all aspects of someone's life – beyond physical pain, it can impede their ability to work and participate in social and other activities like they used to, impact their relationships and cause feelings of isolation, frustration and anxiety.,

While the impact of chronic pain is undeniable to those who live with the condition, its often-invisible nature can lead to many misconceptions. To mark Pain Awareness Month,

which is recognized in September each year, we spoke to illustrator Ciara Chapman, who has been living with chronic pain for five years and uses her artwork to share her experiences with the condition.

Ciara says, “My chronic pain illustrations began as art therapy and the artwork has saved me. It reminds me who I am and reminds me of my ambitions in this world. When it came to describing the experience of living with chronic pain, sometimes words failed me, or there were things I wasn’t comfortable saying. Now I draw my pain, and my loved ones and other patients’ loved ones understand a little bit more what we are going through.”

Below, Ciara helps correct some common myths that she and other chronic pain patients face.

**MYTH: If someone doesn’t look or act like they’re in pain, it can’t be that bad.**

Ciara: “Because chronic pain is an invisible demon, a lot of people have told me, *‘It’s all in your head’*, or, *‘I heard you were sick, but you look fine to me.’* To be in constant pain and at your lowest point, and not be believed by loved ones, is one of the hardest things I’ve had to face. You may look the same, but you are not the same.”

**MYTH: They went to work or an event, so they can’t be in *that* much pain.**

Ciara: “There is no point of the day or night when I don’t feel pain. As a result, I have to weigh every small decision in my life and ask myself, is it worth it? Is the cup of tea I crave worth the pain of making it, and getting up to go to the bathroom later? Am I sick enough to justify going to the doctor, or would I be better off staying home and suffering? If I decide to go for coffee with a friend, it takes me two days to recover. I wake up feeling as though somebody has pushed me down the stairs. Unfortunately, the payoff isn’t always there.”

**MYTH: The impact of chronic pain is only physical.**

Ciara: “Chronic pain doesn’t just affect your body. Every aspect of your life is impacted when you live in pain. When you live with chronic pain, your mental wellbeing is affected as much as your physical wellbeing, and you need to give both equal attention. My husband and I worry constantly about money now and an unexpected expense, like the car breaking down, can finish us.

Your pain changes your personal relationships too. My husband really misses going on dates with me and we’ve never celebrated our wedding anniversary, as my pain developed shortly after we got married. I miss seeing my nephews grow up, and I don’t

even contact my friends because I don't want to bring them down. I feel really bad for the people closest to me, because this affects them too."

[i] Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Advancing Pain Research, Care, and Education. *Relieving Pain in America: A Blueprint for Transforming Prevention, Care, Education, and Research*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2011.

[ii] Goldberg DS., et al. Pain as a global public health priority. *BMC Public Health*. Volume 11, Article number: 770 (2011)

[iii] Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Advancing Pain Research, Care, and Education. *Relieving Pain in America: A Blueprint for Transforming Prevention, Care, Education, and Research*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2011.

Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Advancing Pain Research, Care, and Education. *Relieving Pain in America: A Blueprint for Transforming Prevention, Care, Education, and Research*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2011.

[v] Woo, A. Depression and Anxiety in Pain. *Rev Pain*. 2010; 4(1): 8-12.

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