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## Does Physical Therapy Teach Us Spiritual Wellbeing?

**Hebrews 12:11:** (NASB) *All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.*

**Special Guest: Leah Ruggirello, DPT**



What a pain in the neck, or my back, or my arm or my leg. None of us like physical pain and when we have it we usually try and do all kinds of things to get rid of it. One great way to do this is to go to a physical therapist and let them understand the problem and its source, evaluate and act on that understanding and then help us work through the process to regain our strength and health. What they help us do will probably bring us more pain for a short time so we can have less or no pain for a long time. If you ask us, that is a winning formula. Can the process and treatment we receive from a physical therapist translate into steps we can take to identify, treat and alleviate the pains and malfunctioning of our spiritual lives? The best way to find that answer is to ask a physical therapist, so we did!

(Our guest's comments are shown in purple and may be edited for brevity and clarity.)

I have been a physical therapist for about seven years. I graduated with my Doctorate of Physical Therapy in 2010 and have since specialized primarily in orthopedics, completing Fellowship training in 2014. *Please see the Full Edition CQ Rewind for more details about Leah and how this program came to be.*

We have an eight-step process to walk through that brings us from the event or symptoms of pain to the after-treatment process to see what spiritual lessons we can gain.

**Step 1: Injury Phase** - A person develops pain, sometimes due to an injury like a fall, or playing a sport. Other times pain develops from overuse, such as at a job or repetitive task. Sometimes pain seems to come out of nowhere. If not properly managed in the initial stages of the injury, pain can become a chronic problem and lead to a decline in overall physical health. The more acute the injury, the better the prognosis if help is sought sooner than later.

**Step 1 Spiritual Application: Injury Phase** - We develop spiritual pain and our spiritual life is off center; something is not right in our lives or we have done or dwelled upon something that is not godly. The pain can manifest itself as feelings of guilt, isolation, inability or unworthiness and can lead to a decline in spiritual health.

This may represent a sin, shortcoming/weakness or character flaw. Examples might be when someone struggles with greed, anger, bitterness, rejection, disappointment, resentment - anything not godly. If we do not properly handle these seemingly smaller things quickly, it can lead to an overall decline in our spiritual health. *Please see the Full Edition CQ Rewind for commentary about this phase.*

**Step 2: Asking for help** -The pain becomes severe enough for the person to seek help. Often they see their primary doctor first; in some states people can go directly to physical therapists. The doctor may take x-rays or an MRI to make sure nothing major is happening.

**Step 2 Spiritual Application: Asking for help** - Recognition of our pain (our sin/shortcoming) and seeking spiritual guidance. There are many available sources of such guidance.

First, we should be praying directly to God to get help, but ultimately He works through many different avenues for us to receive that help. Perhaps that means getting spiritual guidance from a trusted Christian friend, maybe a spiritual mentor or leader (like an elder or pastor at your church). This is important because you have to get the right kind of help, the right match. You want to go to someone who can give you the guidance you need. Maybe that means going to more than one person. There is definitely ownership of self on this one, along with humility. It is hard to admit when we are having a spiritual malfunction in our life.

**We can (and ALWAYS SHOULD) go to God through Jesus:** *Hebrews 4:16: Draw near with confidence* - you are going to get the help you need - maybe not in the time or method you would prefer, but this is a great place to start. Spiritual failure can be looked at like spiritual pain needing treatment. We need to stop or alter what we are doing.



**We can go to those who are spiritually more mature than we are:** James 5:13-15: The admonishment is to go to the elders of the church who are to have recognized spiritual maturity. There is great power in pulling spiritual maturity together on your behalf.

**We can go to our trusted Christian friends:** James 5:16: Share your pain with those you trust.

When someone shares their story with me, it begins the relief process. I have had people come in who, as they are telling me their problem, they figure it out on their own and I do not do anything other than say, "Good! I'm glad that's figured out!" They do not need to come back because they have identified what it is themselves and then they make the necessary changes.

The only way they get to that point, though, is by talking to someone they trust. By trusting in someone, we can begin the process of healing our spiritual pain.

**Step 3: Evaluation** - A typical physical evaluation consists of interviewing the patient to gather information on what the pain/problem is, what the history of it is and how it is affecting their life. This is followed by physical testing to determine where the problem is and potential contributing factors. Then the physical therapist and patient develop the plan of care together. *Please see the Full Edition CQ Rewind for commentary about this phase.*

**Step 3 Spiritual Application: Evaluation** - We can spiritually inflame our lives by ignoring things that are going wrong. But depending on who is involved, this can be tricky. Just because someone is our close friend and a Christian does not mean they are qualified to get to the bottom of an issue.

Psalms 19:12: (KJV) *Who can understand his errors? Cleanse thou me from secret faults.*

**Be humble in your choosing:** Galatians 6:2-5: If your Christian friend comes to you with an issue, if we are not equipped to give that advice, we need to be humble enough to realize this and redirect them accordingly. Galatians 6:1: The evaluation process is only successful if we go to the right individuals to get the right input, not necessarily input that is most comfortable to us.

**Step 4: Control inflammation and pain** - During this step, we want to prevent a worsening of the condition for acute injuries. This step may sometimes be omitted if the problem is more chronic. The therapist may try to calm down the pain and inflammation using gentle hands-on techniques, or perhaps they brace or tape an injured limb. *Please see the Full Edition CQ Rewind for commentary about this phase.*

Recovery is a slow, sometimes tedious process. Humility to start, then gentleness and trust are important. It also takes a lot of patience, too. People want a quick fix, but those who are patient and slow themselves down and follow all of these directions usually get better. Those who either do not understand it takes a long time to get better or do not comply with taking a break from the harmful activities are usually the ones who do not get better with physical therapy and have to get extra procedures like injections or surgery. Patience is very important throughout the whole rehab process.

**Step 4 Spiritual Application: Control Inflammation and Pain** - This is likely the more "instant assistance" to the problem to help keep it from getting worse and decrease the overall severity.

Remove negative influences that could be contributing to the spiritual problem. Maybe start reading a Bible verse related to your specific struggle. Perhaps you need to no longer be around certain friends who are not a good influence on your spiritual health. Stop any sinful behavior that might be present and making the problem worse.

Perhaps there is a lesson here regarding the pain being related to a specific event or events rather than the pain being a chronic issue in life. The event-related pain is out of the ordinary and its severity is perhaps more sharply and easily noticed. This could refer to our actions and reactions that cause us spiritual pain and we need help calming those things down and getting back to form.

**Watching what we say and therefore what we are thinking starts this process:** James 1:26: To reduce the inflammation of your spiritual malfunction, watch what you do and say. These contribute to stress and helps things to spin out of control. In a physical sense, patients can get so tensed up over the pain, it seems worse than it actually is.



Sometimes the first few visits might not even involve physical touch. It might just involve talking to them to try to break the cycle of stress-induced pain.

**We are to grow, mature and develop in Christ, not just hang around enjoying the goodness without the growth:** 1 Corinthians 3:1-4: The event-related pain we have in our lives could be related to something that happens to which we have an immature reaction.

The chronic pain could perhaps relate to our deeper character flaws. In some ways, we have learned to live with them and tolerate their presence. This does not diminish the seriousness of the issue; rather, it emphasizes the need for longer and stronger treatment.

Physically, people live with pain for a long time and finally decide to come in for help. Spiritually, sometimes our weaknesses are not necessarily obvious to us. But as we grow and mature spiritually, maybe we are just noticing some of the character flaws we have always had. They have been there all the time.

In other words, we are at a point of maturity where we can say, "Well, THAT does not sound very Christ-like!" Perhaps we have been living with that dull ache but just have gotten so used to it we have not paid attention.

**Examples of chronic spiritual pain in Scripture:** Hebrews 12:14-17: *Root of bitterness* - as a chronic problem. A root is buried underneath that no one sees; you have no idea how big it is. Then you see a little sprout that springs up that likely has a much bigger root system beneath the surface. Spiritually that is the kind of pain we need to deal with.

**In relation to chronic spiritual pain we have learned to deal with or not pay much attention to:** Acts 8:20-24: This is the story of Simon the Magician, who would thrill everyone with his illusions and deceptions. He saw the miracles of Philip and the Holy Spirit being passed through the Apostles. He wanted that power! He was a believer but was so tied up *in the gall of bitterness* that he could not recognize how far off he was. When he offered to BUY the ability to do those miracles, Peter's response was that he had no part in this because he was so spiritually broken there was nothing that could be done to help him. His only recourse was to pray for God's mercy.

**Step 5: Fix the underlying cause(s)** - When the initial pain is under control, the next step is to start fixing the underlying problem(s). The main problem needs to be directly addressed and so do the contributing factors.

With chronic pain, there can be a direct link to the stress in our lives. **Please see the CQ episode from December 5, 2016, "Why Are We SO STRESSED!?"**

Sometimes with chronic problems you eventually identify problems that cannot be fixed by therapy. If the problem is the person's work, they can't quit their job because they will lose their income and not be able to support their families. I can tell you the job is causing the problem but can't fix it. Those cases tend to be harder because you have to let the person go and they still have the problems.

This can happen on a spiritual level as well. We might be in an environment where there are certain kinds of input which we are not capable of getting away from - maybe it is family members, raising rebellious teenagers - sometimes we cannot get rid of our pain. At that point, we have to look at pain management. **Please see the Full Edition CQ Rewind for commentary about this phase.**

**Step 5 Spiritual Application: Fix the underlying cause** - Start fixing the main problem. The specifics will depend on the primary problem and contributing factors, but we can learn to manage if the pain cannot go away.

**Complete trust in God is an important starting point:** Isaiah 64:8: Am I trusting God enough to put the underlying causes of my pain into His hands as though He is the potter and I am the clay, able to be reshaped? Spiritually, if we want to get to the underlying cause of our malfunction, we need to be pliable in the hands of God.

**Claiming the sacrifice of Jesus as we humbly admit our shortcomings is vital:** 1 John 1:7-9: We need to focus on the right things. We should have the sacrifice of Jesus in front of us while we are now getting ready to fix the underlying cause of our pain, sin, shortcoming or flaw.



Keeping him first and foremost is important. **Get back to basics! Keeping the main thing the main thing:** Romans 12:1-2

**Having confidence in the overruling and providence of God through Jesus on your behalf:** Philippians 1:3-6: With physical therapy, you can start working with someone but unless they follow along, it will not work. What do you do to keep patients on track?

Sometimes it is just putting them on the spot a bit by asking them to demonstrate what they are doing outside of therapy. Sometimes I remind people what their goals are, "You told me you wanted to be able to lift a gallon of milk or lift your child. Keep this in mind because we are both working towards the same goal." Make them think about the most important things.

**Step 6: Progress!** - As the pain becomes less and less, the treatment and home exercises can (and should) progress to be more challenging and constructive than just for pain relief. *Please see the Full Edition CQ Rewind for commentary about this phase.*

We need to take step-by-step action to get us functioning, both physically and spiritually.

**Step 6 Spiritual Application: Progress!** - We need to update what we work on spiritually.

**Spiritual health - know your direction and fix your mind on it:** Hebrews 12:2-7: *Fixing our eyes on Jesus* - We fix our focus on the one thing that is most important. That does not mean you only do one thing in your life; it means all those other things you do are to help you get to that focused point. Well, where is the praise of God in having to go to my job every day? How do we serve Jesus in that? It is being Christ-like in whatever our endeavors are. We fix our eyes on Jesus. *Please see the Full Edition CQ Rewind for commentary about this phase.*

**Step 7: Discharged from physical therapy** - Once the patient is no longer feeling any pain and returned back to doing their normal daily activities, they are discharged from physical therapy. *Please see the Full Edition CQ Rewind for commentary about this phase.*

**Step 7 Spiritual Application: Discharged** - Spiritually we should make whatever exercises we learned a habit. *Please see the Full Edition CQ Rewind for commentary about this phase.*

**Step 8: Managing flare ups** - (This step is more often used for chronic conditions.)

When people have chronic pain, they do not always become 100% symptom-free within a course of physical therapy. It is common for them to have "flare ups" of pain periodically, so we teach them various techniques on how to manage the flare ups of pain independently, without needing to come back to me or their doctor. They can do something to help calm the pain down themselves. The individual is empowered to care for themselves. It is no longer overwhelming because they know what to do.

**Step 8 Spiritual Application: Managing flare ups** - If someone has an ongoing spiritual problem they are working to overcome or manage, they can learn techniques to help calm this problem down when they find themselves faced with a particularly difficult situation.

When a person is working through chronic anger and they get cut off in traffic and find they have just shouted at the other driver, they might then do some deep breathing or something along those lines to help calm them down quickly.

**If we have been working on good habits, we will be better equipped to keep ourselves in check:** Romans 12:18-21: Let God take care of those issues. Getting involved causes more spiritual injury and pain. Rather than react to those who would do us harm, let us respond with Christ-likeness. Stop thinking about revenge and frustration. **Spiritual therapy can bring us peace:** Psalms 107:28-31

In summary, sometimes we have a physical injury or sometimes we spiritually have a problem. We want to calm the injury down (stop whatever direct things are causing us to be spiritually weak). Once we are steady, the Lord can strengthen where we are weak as we seek to build ourselves back up. Realize the management of the pain in our lives is in our hands. We can do something with it if we follow the right process.

*So, does physical therapy teach us spiritual wellbeing?  
For Jonathan and Rick (and Leah!) and Christian Questions...  
Think about it...!*