



# Coach Thyself: Resolving Chronic Disease

Imagine you win a major lottery. Anything vast and permanent wealth can create in your life is now yours. That's bound to make you really happy, right? Alternatively, suppose you lost the use of both legs—wouldn't that seriously reduce any future happiness? Just think: you would never walk again. Surprisingly, careful research shows this is not true. Big lottery winners revert quickly to the same or worse levels of happiness. But, astonishingly, paraplegics confined to wheelchairs end up typically as happy and fulfilled as they were before.

With this in mind, let's look at chronic diseases. Among these are conditions that don't diagnose easily, won't seem to go away, and can amount to either minor or major stumbling blocks in life. They certainly do not impact individuals the way loss of two or more limbs would. But here's what's odd. These ailments cut very often more deeply into people's happiness than does living from a wheelchair

Our dominant approach to health care is impersonal, liability-driven, drug-centered, over-specialized, and largely mechanical. Together, these create a kind of chronic disease trap. Working as a wellness coach, helping people avoid this trap, I regularly see the patterns that create it. Watch for these, and your prognosis gets much better.

Paraplegics don't "cure" their condition. Instead, *it evolves them*. As the loss is accepted, they focus on exploring from the wheelchair the in's and out's of a new way of living. Interests and talents that were dormant before germinate and take root. New activities arise that bypass the condition. These populate the landscape of a different, but equally, or sometimes, more fulfilling life. I'm not suggesting this doesn't take courage. It does. But there's such an important

reversal. Here, you could almost say, *it's the disease that "cures" the person*. As a quadriplegic, Christopher Reeve became another kind of "superman". Dr. Dan Gottlieb, of WHY?Y's "Voices in the Family", similarly challenged, has created an amazing life.

Alternatively, afflicted with a chronic condition, you very often find yourself on a confusing merry-go-round of "treatments" aimed at fixing it. These can be slow and possibly strenuous. You lose time to tests and appointments, and go on elaborate regimens of supplements or prescription drugs. You may endure extreme cleanses or enforced dietary changes. Side effects appear. Various learned and hopefully caring specialists still all see something different as "the" likely cause. Most advise some narrowly focused remedy to push that variable back in place. Meanwhile, costs mount and your previous ways of enjoying life go on hold. Fear becomes a real issue. In short, the "cure" is now every bit as much of a problem as the disease.

Is it important for medical professionals to rule out or treat clear cut, major diseases? Certainly. Can supplements, cleanses, or medications help? Absolutely. But their effectiveness drops significantly if your interests, passions, and ways of enjoying life are fading from view. Or if, perhaps, they had already gone missing somewhere along the way. *Your body rallies best in support of some form of passionately pursued interests*. What if your symptoms are themselves a biological call to restore lost meaning?

Resolving chronic diseases means really accepting the limitations they impose, temporarily at least, and at the same time maintaining, rekindling, or evolving that which interests and excites you. Do this, and one of two things will

follow. Either you will actually get the cure that eluded you before—because you have gotten the message to grow and avoided the trap. Or else the "disease" will move off to the side. It will become something with minimal impact on your meaningful life.

In my early sixties, I developed a painful condition in my feet. Having lived a very health-conscious life, I was shocked. Over 15 months, 9 different alternative and mainstream healing professionals worked with me. Ultimately, no physiological explanation appeared. Despite the care and support of these good individuals, it only got worse. The pain punched right through medication. I had to quit working. Walks, woodwork, sailing, dancing, social life, even pain-free days disappeared from my life. It seemed like I would be crippled.

At the same time, I never quit trying to fathom what my body was telling me. I wrote reports trying to get the various practitioners to understand each other's perspectives. I saw the downward spiral I was in and held on fiercely to whatever was left that I could enjoy. At its worst, satisfaction for me dwindled to sitting and carving little figures out of wood—an ambition I had never found time for before. Only when the quest led to family constellation work and wellness coaching did my feet improve.

A terrible experience, yes? But I see it now as the best thing that ever happened to me. Is that hard to believe? Well, out of it came a new career, the love of a wonderfully well-matched partner, and a self deeply liberated from the scars of a dysfunctional birth family. This is the lottery I had always wanted to win. ▲

<sup>1</sup> Martin Seligman Ph.D., *Authentic Happiness*, p. 48