

In Our Space

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june's story: I won my war!

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I wake up in the morning to discover the war has not ended throughout the night. That the lights I see are not fireworks celebrating the victory but, the lights that are created inside my head. They are dim, they are bright, spots and flashes, blindness and darkness. They can flash like a strobe light at raves. Sometimes it feels like I'm at a rave. Loud, confusing, hyper, exhausting, spinning, over crowded, bright, dark, a kaleidoscope of colours. A party that will only become too intense.

I know I want to take the handful of beautifully coloured and shaped pills endlessly offered to me. I need them. I want them. These little pills will take me somewhere else. Somewhere better. For this is a party that I didn't get invited to. I wasn't informed before I was pushed through those doors that I could never leave. That I could never be happy again. That I had entered a living hell and I would live there for eternity.

My hell, is inside my own body. This is hard to explain unless you have experienced it yourself. What I'm talking about is migraine and how I managed to defy eternal turmoil and get my life back. This is my story.

I was 14 years old and I was on a trip with my family. We had rented a cottage and we were driving home from town after a fun evening of bowling, when we stopped at a fruit stand to buy some berries. The blackberries were so beautiful that we ate the whole basket on the way back to the cottage!

Like a snap of the fingers I had intense pain, throbbing and burning down the left side of my face and neck and I thought my eye ball was going to pop out from the pressure. My skin hurt all over my body like I had a terrible sunburn. I felt like a vampire being exposed to light and I was spinning out of control with vertigo. I screamed and coiled in pain. We arrived back at the cottage where I could barely get out of the car. I started vomiting which made all of the other pain even more excruciating. I curled into the fetal position in the bathtub and begged for no one to touch me as my skin was on fire.

I stayed this way for several hours as my parents pleaded with me to go with them to the hospital. There was no hospital close by. It would be hours of travel to get there and there was no way I was getting back into a car.

And then...everything stopped as fast as it started and although I was tired, it seemed like nothing had happened.

We blamed the blackberries. Wondering if they were contaminated with something, as we couldn't think of anything that could cause such quick symptoms other than a poisoning. No one in my family had ever experienced a migraine.

What I also didn't know is that this was my first migraine of many to come and my life would be barely livable.

For 14 years I followed the same daily routine. I would wake up with a mild headache, dizziness, nausea and a blind spot in my right eye. As the day progressed, my symptoms would get far worse with the addition of slurred speech, spontaneous paralysis of the left or right side of my face and occasionally my left arm. My skin would hurt so horribly. By 5pm I would have to pull over on the shoulder of the road, get into the back seat, leave the door open so I could be sick outside, swallow a handful of pain medications and hope they would stay down long enough to start working and wait for things to subside enough to drive home. I travelled for my sales position so this was my only option.

I would arrive home intoxicated with medication, unable to finish my work from that day, unable to enjoy my husband's company or any activities or hobbies and unable to eat. I would crawl into bed and pray that I could sleep. Only to wake the next morning and repeat.

After a short 2.5 year marriage, I was divorced. I don't blame my ex-husband for ending our marriage as what kind of partner could I be? I knew the exact moment that he had decided it was over. I was visiting yet another neurologist about my migraines and the neurologist actually said to me "we, as medical professionals do not know how migraines start or why they behave the way they do or even what they really are, you will have to learn to live with them". I looked at my husband through my tears and saw that not only was I defeated but, that he also was tired of suffering from migraines and he could no longer "live with them".

I was so fortunate to have several really great friends and my family was very supportive. Everyone always tried to help me through my difficult days and to encourage me to keep searching for help. I lived a very limited life when it came to social activities. I began to say no to any and all invitations to social events as I couldn't predict how bad of a day I was going to have and the evenings and nights were always the worst.

My closest friends and family would celebrate my birthday and holidays with a breakfast or brunch so that I may be able to attend. I continued to live this life trying a variety of drug therapies, naturopathic doctors, chiropractors, physiotherapists, acupuncturists and Chinese medical doctors. I travelled across Canada and the United States, Europe and South America in search of anyone that offered help. I had no success.

Surprisingly, I did not feel any anger towards all the people that tried to help and failed, as they were only doing what they knew to the best of their ability. I did however become quite depressed from side effects of medications and my limited, unhappy life.

One day, as I was driving to work, I heard a radio interview with The Ontario Migraine Clinic's Brendan Cleary. He is an acupuncturist that is very successful in treating migraine. I didn't give it much thought as I had, had acupuncture treatment many times in the past with no relief.

A few weeks passed and I couldn't get this interview out of my mind. Brendan Cleary had explained migraine and his approach to treatment that actually made sense to me and I decided to at least have a consultation.

I arrived at the clinic with my migraine almost at it's peak and the clinic was packed with patients. Some very sick with their migraines, some smiling and laughing and some with a look of shock on their faces.

I was greeted by a very kind receptionist who escorted me into a treatment room. Here, I finally met this acupuncturist, that I was sure wasn't going to be able to help, like all the others. After a brief discussion about my problem he asked if I would be okay with having some treatment to get rid of the migraine that I presently had. I, of course, said "you can try" with little enthusiasm and lots of skepticism. He took my wrists individually and assessed my pulse. With this he was able to determine where he needed to put the needles to alleviate my migraine symptoms. He placed a few needles, which I expected would all be in my head but, they were in my hand, arm, ankle, head and ear. Strange, I thought but, within minutes my migraine started to diminish. In a few more minutes, it was almost gone and after about 15 minutes I did not have any migraine symptoms! I had not had a minute without some degree of suffering in 14 years! I

was now one of the people with this shocked looked on my face. We then proceeded to discuss my health problems and concerns and how it effected me including my mental state. No one ever asked me how I was coping. I felt such ease that someone was finally listening and cared. Brendan explained why I had migraines. I never was given an explanation for why I suffered the way I did. I had been repeatedly told that there was no explanation for migraines and that there was no way of treating them. Only drug therapy would help control them. This however, is not the case. He explained to me, in a language that I was able to understand, why the acupuncture treatment I would receive would work.

To summarize, Brendan explained that migraine is a result of my body not working optimally. That various things that had happened to me over the years had caused my body to become weaker. My body is designed to heal itself quite efficiently but it can be compromised by day to day challenges. For me, I had, had multiple concussions and head and neck injuries. I also was sick frequently as a child and took antibiotics repeatedly. As my system became weaker and weaker I was not able to tolerate normal every day stresses and consequently I would end up with a migraine. I had just reached a point that day at the cottage and eating blackberries where I simply couldn't handle any more. This made sense. This I could understand. This consultation that I was so skeptical about would finally change my life in a positive way.

Brendan informed me that I would need a minimum of 2 treatments per week and that I would still experience migraines during this time while my body was starting to fix itself. He also taught me breathing exercises that I was to do during the treatment as well as on my own. Each treatment took between 20-30 minutes. He also explained that I could continue to take the medications that I was using to help with the pain, as needed, so I could still function.

I left the clinic still in shock but with the first glimmer of hope that I had felt in a long time. I slept through the night, which is something I also was unable to do over the years and woke up very confused. I hadn't woken up without pain for so long that I thought something was very wrong with me. When I finally realized that I in fact was just fine and had no migraine, I cried with sheer joy!

After a few weeks of treatment I had only had four migraines. I had reduced my medication use by half within 6 weeks and was completely without all of my migraine symptoms after 16 weeks of treatment.

At the clinic I met some really wonderful supportive people who have remained great friends. I also met a few famous people as Brendan treats all kinds of different problems, like concussions and chronic injuries so I met a few pro athletes as well as some tv personalities. People come from all over the world seeking help from this clinic and from all walks of life. It was helpful to see others who had also been suffering getting better and sharing our stories and struggles with each other was comforting. I continued to have treatment 2x a week for about another 3 months. After this 3 month period I had treatment about once a week for another month and then every other month and still visit the clinic once or twice a year for a tune up.

At times it was really difficult to fit in my treatments. It was really hard to push myself to go when I was feeling great but, I knew I had to commit to getting better and would do whatever it took to stay healthy.

Because, there are so many people who suffer from migraine or know someone who suffers from migraine, I feel that I need to share with as many people as possible, my story and the clinic and man that saved my life.

I am now happily remarried. I have two beautiful children. I am able to attend all of my children's activities and I have a date night with my husband once a week. I am able to run, hike, canoe, dance, golf and play volleyball again.

I say "yes" to all invitations and I genuinely feel that every day is special. Fourteen years of my life were sacrificed. I have a lot of catching up to do!

Know that there is help. Fight for your health and your happiness. I strongly urge anyone who suffers or knows someone who suffers to call the clinic that I attended as it just may be the best decision of your life. I met many people who were suffering much worse than myself and for most of their lives. They too got better. I won my war!

