

Today I Put My Socks On

3/9/2016

Okay, so this might not seem so fantastical. Let me give you the backstory.

In early 2013, I had my third flare up of low back pain. In the previous 5 years, I had two flare-ups that lasted between 9-10 months each. Wonder why I let it get to a third? Well, I was busy. I was building a practice, opening up a multidisciplinary clinic, developing curriculum, coordinating a massage program and teaching. Besides, a truckload of Robaxacet, Aleve and Advil kept me fairly functional. By functional I mean, I couldn't sit or stand for any length of time comfortably and I had the occasional searing pain down my leg. No biggie. This third one though, it was a different. When it started, I had been lifting heavy...way too heavy. I was always pretty strong, and this foray away from yoga and into weight training fed my ego (Thanks Courtney lol). I had a big ego. I didn't realize how big until I started training, and training heavy enough to make the boys jealous. My bench was heavy, my squat was heavy, my deadlift was heavy, my leg press was CRAZY! Sounds awesome huh? Well, not exactly. Every single one of these movements were done poorly, and were often done while in pain.

All of this set me up very nicely for my third and final flare up. It started at the beginning of 2013. I had just started working at a new clinic, was less than 1 year into a new relationship and it all just kind of happened. It was familiar when it first started, but it often came and went so I was initially not so concerned. By April, every time I went into the gym, working out would cause an intense burning across my low back. I often had to lift my shirt up because it felt as if my skin were on fire. No biggie. Get those pull-ups done and I'll down an NSAID later. By mid-April, this burning sensation was constant. One leg day, in mid-April, I had an out of body experience. It was leg press day. This was my day! 12-14 plates a side, and the worst form you've ever seen in your life. I was in pain. So much pain, but I kept going. This is when I had this experience. I saw myself having to pull my body up using my arms, heaving myself to standing, limping to add another plate. I watched this stupid girl do this over, and over. Set after set. At that moment, I truly realized the scope of my ego problem. At this point, I still didn't realize that there would be no turning back. The decline happened quickly from here. I lost the ability to do all the things we all take for granted. I taught classes standing while leaning over my desk and watched TV standing and leaning over the back of the couch. I could no longer sit without pain. My sleep progressively got worse. It started by only being able to sleep in child's pose, then only on my back with my knees dropped to the left, then I couldn't lie down without pain and had to stand and lean over the bed to sleep. That is how I slept from May to August. Driving became very difficult. I couldn't get into or out of the car without breaking into a fit of sweating from pain. Often while driving, I found that I couldn't stand the pain of my pant leg on my right leg or my key chain rubbing up on my thigh. I would often have to hike up my pant leg to drive, and had to take all my other keys off my key chain. I now understood allodynia. I was a terrible passenger. I went from lying on my side, to kneeling on the passenger seat to whimpering. I taught yoga and was a massage therapist. I continued to work because I had bills to pay.

So where were the doctors visits in all this? My first few visits to the doc were fruitless. I was tough so didn't let on to how much pain I was in, and despite my loss of function and excruciating pain, I was still flexible enough to pass a toe touch. According to my doc, this was just a matter of "let it heal". Within a few weeks of my first doctors visit, I began to notice a pretty prominent and annoying foot slap on the right side, and inability to completely empty my bladder. At this point, I wasn't sure if this was a more serious sign or if it was because I had progressed to not being able to sit to "go" and

just couldn't relax enough to empty my bladder fully. I went in to see my doctor again. At this point, I broke down and cried in her office. I never do this. I never cry in front of people. She finally understood. She provided me a requisition for an MRI. Three days after my MRI, I got a call from my doctor to review the results. Two days after that appointment, I got called by the neurosurgeons office for a consult. This was a pretty good indication that this was no joke. I was scared but relieved. Up to this point, I was living on handfuls of Tylenol 3, and an anti-depressant for pain management. I was also seeing every therapist I could. I did massage, craniosacral, Bowen technique, acupuncture, homeopathy, meditation, and laser therapy. Thousands and thousands of dollars. When I walked into the neurosurgeons office, he led me to his exam room, did a little poking around, some orthopedic tests, handed me a package labelled "pre-op" and told me the receptionist could set a date for my surgery. I was shocked. What? Me? Surgery? What do you mean? He took me to his office to show me my MRI. He explained what we were looking at and what it all meant. I told him all the therapies I was trying. At that moment, he sat down with me, looked me in the eyes and said "By all means, try everything. Try all of those things, and if they work, cancel your surgery date." He then said, very gently and honestly "But please don't spend too much of your money doing this. Your MRI shows a very damaged disc, and it has already been several months of worsening symptoms." I felt defeated. Defeated by my own intervertebral disc! I walked out of that office with my pre-op instructions and a surgery date - August 27th. What? Three more months of this? How will I manage?

It certainly didn't get better, in fact, it got much worse. I had several more visits to my doctor to try to get some pain relief and one pretty terrible emergency room visit. I added gabapentin and lyrica to my cocktail of drugs. Within weeks, none of them could touch the pain. If I took my dose of T3's, it took about an hour for them to kick in. That would take my pain from 10/10 to 8/10 for 45min to an hour, if I was lucky. I learned to time my drugs so that I could work, drive, have a shower, do grocery shopping. I had it down to a not so exact science. I needed to take my drugs at 9am so they would kick in midway on my drive to work and would give me enough relief to get me through at least my first couple treatments until I could take more drugs. I couldn't do regular daily activities like grocery shopping. For one, I couldn't trust my pain. I never knew when a big flare up would hit and I feared myself ending up curled up on the floor of aisle 7. I couldn't carry the weight of my purse so it was definitely hard to do groceries even without the fear of public embarrassment. I sweat. A lot. I was constantly sweaty from the high level pain. I cried. A lot. From pain but also from frustration. I couldn't workout, I couldn't stand in the shower, I couldn't lie down to sleep, I couldn't sit at a coffee shop with a friend, I couldn't brush my teeth without letting my pain killer kick in. But I never let on how much pain I was in. I didn't want my family to worry. I didn't want to burden anyone with that. It wouldn't have changed anything anyway. My fiancée knew. He was witness to many breakdowns. He forced me to go to the emergency room when he picked me up after teaching a yoga class, got me home and I began screaming in pain. I could keep it together to do some downward dogs so that no one would know, but once I was home I just couldn't bear being strong any longer. He saw me in those moments, and was the target of my miserable attitude and cruelty when I was frustrated and hopeless. He took all of it on with patience and kindness. (For that, I am eternally grateful) In July, he was posted overseas and I was just waiting for August to come. As August approached, the pain and my tolerance were waning. On August 26th, the day before my surgery, I taught a yoga class and treated my last set of clients. Worked right to the last hours. My parents drove me into the hospital the morning of my surgery. I arrived, saw my surgeon again and met some of the surgical team. I was getting my micro-discectomy. They gave me some sedatives and pain killers while they were prepping me for the OR. The surgeon put an "X" on my right ankle and disappeared into the operating room. As they took me into the OR, I felt relief but also fear. I had all my eggs in this basket. If this surgery didn't work, I didn't know how I could go on with this pain. How I could continue to live with the pain I had been in for the last several months. The anesthesiologist sat to my left and began to induce my slumber. I

remember leaving that room. I remember waking in recovery. I woke up to the most amazing experience I have ever had, I was in no pain. None. In fact, the morning of my surgery was the last time I took any pain meds. I took no pain medication after my surgery. Not even an Advil. Nothing. A few hours after having been admitted, I was on my way to Starbucks before going home to rest. There are no words to describe that experience except to say that it was the most wonderful miracle of science and miracle, and I felt very lucky. After two weeks, I went back to work - treating and teaching yoga - slowly. I couldn't have asked for a better outcome.

In the months and years that followed, I was so grateful to have no pain. I was still very limited in movement but I didn't have pain. NOW lets get to those socks! I couldn't put on socks or shoes properly so I found other ways. But I had no pain. I couldn't get something out of the oven because bending over and taking on the weight of my trunk and upper limbs was too much so I found other ways. But I had no pain. I got very stiff through the night and when I woke up I couldn't move well so I found other ways to get out of bed and move around in the first couple hours of my day. But I had no pain. There was this constant stiffness and immovability in my low back, but compared to before the surgery, this was a small price to pay. I decided that this would be okay, as long as I didn't have that pain. For a short time after the surgery, I continued my quest to be strong (my ego was better, but I was still not completely smartened up). I got to a whopping 205 bench, weighted pull-ups and regular, easy 225 deadlifts. Not bad. But I still couldn't put on my socks. This seemed at odds with my "gym strength", and one day I finally realized it. I realized that I was responsible for teaching my body how to move again, and that it was safe to move again. I realized that a bench press meant nothing if I couldn't cross my leg without heaving my shin up by awkwardly grabbing my pant leg.

So, I changed the way I moved. I traveled to NY to take an SFG user course to learn how to hip hinge, goblet squat and execute a Turkish get up. I started to make these movements part of my regular workouts and my every day. I started with little to no weight and earned my way to more. I took several pounds off the bar to execute my bench with control and integrity. I got on the floor so my brain would feel safe while I moved. My stiffness started to decrease, I started to feel more stable doing simple tasks. Almost 2 years after my surgery, I woke up one morning to get ready to go to work. I brushed my teeth, put some clothes on and then I did it..... I put on my socks! I put on my socks like a normal person. My hips hinged and externally rotated beautifully as I dropped my butt back and lifted one leg, my lumbar spine produced flexion, my standing leg supported the weight of my body as I lifted one foot up off the floor and put my sock on with two hands. It was amazing! I was happier about this achievement than my kick ass max bench (kinda lol). I had gained so much after the surgery, but initially conceded to lose my mobility in exchange for pain relief. That was ridiculous. I didn't need to accept the loss of my mobility in exchange for pain relief. I just needed to earn my stability to gain my mobility.

If you are in a situation where you have accepted something in exchange for another perceived benefit...STOP. You don't always have to make these compromises. You can have it all. You just may need a little help to get your socks on again. You may just need to take a step back before taking one forward.