



My Descent Into the Abyss

I was driving across a bridge late at night, when suddenly my heart began to pound at a furious pace. I couldn't breathe. I was sweaty, light-headed, and I thought I was dying from a heart attack. I was only 37 years-old.

This was the first of many panic attacks I would have over the next two years.

In one minute, I went from being a fearless spine surgeon to experiencing relentless, progressive anxiety. I wouldn't emerge from this slow spiral into hell for 13 years. What happened and why so suddenly?

The beginning

My first migraine happened on the 4th of July. I was five and excited because the local fireworks were being set off in the town commons, directly across the street from our house. But as the sun set, my head began to throb and by 10 o'clock I felt like I was being hit with a sledgehammer. The fireworks less than 100 yards away weren't helpful.

This was the first of 17 symptoms of a stressed nervous system I developed over the next 50 years. My suffering included tinnitus, burning feet, prolonged tendonitis, insomnia, anxiety, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), major depression, migratory skin rashes, crushing chest pain, sweats, PTSD, back and neck pain, heart palpitations, light-headedness, and tension headaches. At my lowest point, these were all occurring simultaneously.



The “perfect” family

My father was a family doctor in a small, New England town. He was highly respected and appreciated. My mother was active in many local activities. I was the oldest of four children, with two brothers and a sister. People would often comment on what a beautiful family we were – and we were, from the outside.

- What was not known was that my mother was in an intense rage most of the time. She was physically and verbally abusive to my siblings and me. My father wasn't around and he didn't comprehend the full extent of the situation. Since this was all we knew, we thought this was what life was supposed to be like,

Interestingly, one of the few things that would cut her anger short was one of my migraines. She would instantly become a loving and nurturing mother, placing cold compresses on my forehead, and keeping everyone quiet.

My new identity

When I entered high school, I felt a deep shift. I was increasingly aware that my family life was not ideal, and I decided that I had had enough. I “shut the door” on my past.

Although I still lived at home, I mentally separated from the chaos. I embarked on a quest to create a new identity. I became an excellent student, trumpet player, hard worker, leader, and athlete. During my junior year in college I took 18 to 21 hours of credit every quarter, worked construction 10-20 hours a week, played sports, had an active social life, ran for student body president, and pulled off a 4.0 GPA. I was having the time of my life. I wasn't sleeping much.

I continued on to graduate from medical school with honors and was accepted in a competitive orthopedic residency in Hawaii. With a great wife, a home in Hawaii, and a promising career, I thought I had it made. I was unaware that I was keeping busy to outrun my past and I had also become a master at suppressing unpleasant emotions.

I completed two years of internal medicine residency before I entered surgical training in Hawaii. Most orthopedic residents undergo a couple of years of general surgery residency before specializing and are comfortable in the operating room. I had never made a skin incision or even knew how to tie a knot. However, handling stress was such a core part my existence, I did not feel it. I was wrapped up in my identity of being “cool under pressure.”

I did notice that my feet burned while I was jogging, which I thought was due to the warm, Hawaiian pavement. My migraines were more frequent and I had a reoccurrence of warts over both of my hands. One afternoon, while in a weekly orthopedic conference, I noticed some vivid, intrusive thoughts entering my mind. I didn't think too much about it, but I felt a bit unsettled. Still, I was on top of the world, enjoying my family, learning, and living in a paradise.

Stress

The wheels started to come off when during my post-residency spine fellowship at one of the top programs in the world. It was not as physically demanding as the rest of my residency, but the expectations were extremely high. My migraines were occurring every other week and my ears started to ring, in addition to my feet burning. I pushed through it all.

My “iron man identity” continued to evolve. It seemed that I could handle an unlimited amount of stress. It was a badge of honor. The obstacles I encountered in private practice dwarfed any prior challenges in my training. I recall sitting at my desk one night after working yet another 14-hour day. A patient had developed a serious postoperative wound infection. Another one had gotten into a fight with a security guard. I discovered I wasn't getting a paycheck that month because of the high office overhead. My mindset was, “Bring it on.”

A few weeks later, I crashed with a panic attack out of the blue.

It was only the beginning

Little did I know how severe these symptoms would become and how many more would occur. Skin rashes popped up and disappeared all over my body, my scalp itched, my nightmares became more intense, I had deep aching pains in my upper back and crushing chest pain.

There were other terrible aspects of my ordeal. I am a social person and since I didn't feel great, I quit spending as much time with my friends. The loneliness was crushing. No marriage could have survived all of these untreated symptoms, because I was often not in a great mood. I worked at hiding it from almost everyone.

As my family disintegrated, I descended into a full-blown obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). I had the internal version, which is experiencing vivid intrusive thoughts, that I would then try to counter with “good”

thoughts. I was in an endless, unwinnable battle and my thoughts progressed to disturbing impulses. Along with my many other symptoms, I was in bad shape. I then made the mistake of reviewing some articles on OCD and discovered that the prognosis was (and still is) poor. The best outcome would be to somehow manage or diminish the symptoms with medications or behavioral therapy. I became totally despondent. There was no escape and I sunk into a major suicidal depression. Still, no one could explain to me what was going on or how to solve it



Penetrating the facade

I now understand that major life changes, especially around family dynamics, create more stress and symptoms. The stresses can be positive or negative. The problem with major family events is that they penetrate the façade, and I had been working on mine for decades. A major shift in my symptoms occurred with the birth of my son. My divorce was disastrous. The burning in my feet increased to the point where they felt like they were in a toaster oven. The ringing in my ears was intolerable, I couldn't sleep, all my other symptoms worsened, and the extreme, unrelenting anxiety was intolerable.

I pursued many self-help books, took medications, saw other physicians, underwent multiple diagnostic tests, and aggressively pursued psychotherapy and counseling. I was both open to anything and desperate.

I would've thought that meeting my current wife would have been the answer to my suffering. We had an instant connection and I fell in love – except it felt like I was falling off of a cliff. I lost more control. When I mustered up the courage to tell her that I was in love with her, she thought I was going to tell her that I had terminal cancer. My suffering dramatically worsened and I was beginning to seriously give up. No avenue of treatment was working. I had no hope.

Today

Slowly, things changed. I escaped the grip of chronic pain in 2003 and have continued to gain a deeper understanding of what happened, as well as the principles behind the solutions. I think the reason that the concepts presented in my book, *Back in Control: A Surgeon's Roadmap Out of Chronic Pain* have been helpful for so many people is that it evolved from my own prolonged suffering. Almost everything I tried failed, and when I experienced the faintest glimpse of a way out, I was able to keep building on it, step-by-step.

Not only am I doing well, I am thriving at a level that I never conceived was possible. It is my honor and privilege to be able to share these strategies with you, help you avoid the pitfalls, and be a witness to your healing journey.