

My Body is My Boss Now

Gerry Fisher, Life Consultant

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180 Massachusetts Avenue
Unit 301, Office #3
Arlington, MA 02474

Phone: (781) 929-6341
E-mail: gfisher-LICSW@comcast.net
Internet: <http://www.gerryfisher.com/>

I am very thankful to be returning to my life-consultation practice after taking a three-month-long leave of absence to undergo back surgery and recover. I had a herniated disk with very debilitating sciatica (pain down the left leg). Of course, having had my surgery at the beginning of March, I'm not even close to completing my recovery.

I knew all along that I wanted to write about my back experience, but I wasn't sure what should be my focus. I could go on and on about the difficulties I had with the medical community and how hard it was to find providers who really listened and consulted with me. I could talk about how I, like many men, had much of my ego wrapped up in my job and how much I could contribute to others; I had no job for months, my husband did all household chores (there were even times when I needed help bathing and dressing), and I still cannot lift more than 10 pounds. I could focus on how I had to make peace with a new level of understanding I now have about what it means to be middle aged, vulnerable, and mortal ("Is this 'gradual decline' in ability what it feels like to die?!").

But, in the end, I think that the aspect of my personal experience that most informs my counseling practice is how I learned to submit my will to reality. Let me explain further.... At the beginning of my experience last May, when I first felt serious pain after a weekend of walking in Montreal, I didn't even think of seeing a doctor; my retired jock mentality led me to conclude that I just needed to get back to the gym and get back in shape (which, of course, made my condition worse). My stubborn willfulness continued throughout the summer, culminating in an ill advised trip to a water park in August. It was then that I passed the point of no return, and I began a period of increasingly declining ability, until I was technically "disabled."

Throughout my disability, pain made it hard to concentrate and think. It was also difficult to manage the expectations of everyone around me (I received tons of advice on how to treat my back problem). It was around mid-October when I finally submitted. I began to focus—as best I could—on how my body felt, and what it was telling me about what I could or could not do.

Sometimes heat felt better, and sometimes cold did the trick; my body guided me. Sometimes elevating my legs felt better, and sometimes it felt worse; I knew I was doing the right thing when my body felt better. Sometimes laying on my left side did it, and sometimes laying on my right was the thing. Sometimes I could walk a bit around the block, and sometimes walking was painful. For the month of February, I remained on the living room floor, because my body told me that that was the extent to which I could move. I cried “Uncle!”, and I dutifully followed the lead of my body. Including the decision to undergo surgery.

Now that I’m on the mend, I think about the notion of “pay attention to your body and follow its guidance,” and I wonder how I or anyone else could ever do anything differently. Our bodies tell us when to rest, when and how to heal, when to eat, when to sleep, and more. How crazy we get when we think that our deadline or obligations or passions or pride are more important than following the lead of our bodies.

During my disability and even now, I marvel at how many messages I see in the media that tempt us with thinking that we are forever young, that putting our bodies at risk is “cool,” that it’s a good idea to seek entertainment that is more and more extreme, and so on. There’s a TV ad in which a young man climbs a stone stairwell railing of a stadium, climbs up the outside of a wall, does a back flip while bounding down another railing, performs various other dangerous acrobatics, lands in his seat within the stadium, and elicits a smile from his blond, beautiful girlfriend who is playing tennis in the stadium. I know I am supposed to admire him, want to be like him, want to have what he has, and so on. Instead, I shake my head, vow never to be fooled like that again, and hope that he learns before life smacks him down and disables him to teach him a lesson. Been there, done that!