

## **Jenny's Experience: I Know These Sensations are Not Dangerous**

Jenny is a 58-year-old woman from Ontario, Canada who lived with chronic pain for 37 years. Her challenges with pain began when she was 20 years old after her car was rear-ended by a tow truck. Progressively over the years, the pain made Jenny's life smaller and smaller until, within the last year, she discovered a newer psychological therapy for chronic pain called Pain Reprocessing Therapy (PRT). PRT focuses on retraining the brain to interpret and respond to signals from the body in different ways. This approach has worked for Jenny, and it worked quickly. She shared with me: "My pain probably reduced 30% to 40%, just by reading [a book on PRT] because my fear decreased." Jenny is no longer afraid of the sensations, and pain no longer controls and overwhelms her life like it did for over three decades. Jenny is not only doing better pain-wise at this point; she has found a new joy in life, and she feels like she has become her authentic self.

### **The Stories Made Sense**

After the car accident, the pain Jenny was experiencing never really went away. It started in her low back, and over the years, it spread to her midback, upper back, neck, shoulders, and arms. She spent decades trying to figure out why she was in pain and how to make it go away. Through this time, she received five different diagnoses offering explanations for the pain. After getting magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) in her late twenties, she was told that she had degenerative discs. Eight years later, another MRI led to her being told that she had herniated discs. Another MRI suggested nerve impingement. Jenny told me: "I had lots and lots of evidence from the scans of why the pain was continuing and getting worse." In addition to the diagnoses she received, Jenny was repeatedly told that the physical demands of her career as a dental hygienist were making things worse.

Jenny lives in a small community where the practitioners she saw were not trained in mindbody approaches. So, despite seeking help from a countless number of practitioners, the explanations for her pain always centred around the structure of her back, the car accident, and her profession. And these stories made sense. Jenny had no reason to doubt them. And they contributed to a fear of the pain and a fear of moving. These stories, particularly the ones around the structural problems in Jenny's back, also led her to believe that the pain was inescapable. As one doctor told her: "The pain is forever." Jenny shared with me: "As the years went on, my quality of life definitely decreased ... [and] my life got very small." And up until very recently, Jenny believed her life would be like this forever. She told me: "My life was existing, and I kind of thought this is what I'll do until the day I die."

### **Almost Four Decades of Trying Everything**

Even in the face of a discouraging prognosis, Jenny persisted. She saw many different doctors and had all kinds of different tests. She tried "medication for nerve pain, anti-inflammatories, opioids, [and] medical marijuana." She saw every allied health

professional she could find, including physiotherapists, chiropractors, massage therapists, athletic therapists, Reiki practitioners, and osteopaths. She was diligent in following through on everything these practitioners advised her to do. She told me: “I had a file of exercises from physiotherapists and chiropractors that I would do daily. ... I was so committed to trying to get better or to improve the quality of my life.” Despite this consistent effort, Jenny’s pain persisted. One of the few positions where she could find relief was lying out flat, and she told me, “I spent most of my life lying out flat on my kitchen floor. I chose the kitchen floor especially when my son was still younger and living at home so that I still felt I was part of the family.”

## **Fear of Chronic Pain**

The course of Jenny’s life changed one day in February 2023. At a physiotherapy appointment, she brought up with her practitioner that she was starting to feel overwhelmed by the fear of doing something that would increase her pain. Although her physiotherapist did not have an answer or suggestion for her, later that day she picked up her phone and searched “fear of chronic pain.” She was clicking on different things that came up in her search, and she told me: “All of a sudden so many things started to make sense, and things that I had never heard of before, but I was fascinated by what I was seeing.” One of the things that came up was a book on PRT by Alan Gordon called *The Way Out*. She ordered this book, it was on her doorstep in a couple of days, and as I noted above, Jenny experienced a significant reduction in her pain just from reading this book. The fear that had been overwhelming her—and there for decades—began to quickly fall away. In being exposed to this approach, Jenny told me that she thought: “Oh my God, this is my answer.” She knew right away that this approach would help her and that she would get better. Jenny said to me: “I knew I could get better. I don’t know why I just was so confident of that.”

Reading *The Way Out* began a process of exploring mindbody approaches to chronic pain that has been life-changing for Jenny. Thanks to psychotherapy being available over video conference, she was able to work with a pain psychotherapy clinic in a different Canadian province that specializes in PRT. With respect to the impact of the therapy, Jenny told me:

*The pain reprocessing therapy and the somatic tracking, honestly within a few weeks, I was probably 75% better. It really was amazing, like two or three sessions, I was just so far on my way, then of course it gives you more and more confidence that just seeing how well this is working.*

In addition to therapy, Jenny continued to read and research as much as she could. After 37 years in pain and reaching a point where she thought her life would just be about existing, Jenny suddenly found herself experiencing the changes she had been seeking for decades and believing without a doubt that she would get better.

## **In a Good Situation to Heal**

After having her life so negatively impacted by pain for almost 40 years, Jenny's recovery time was remarkably quick, and there are many factors that supported her healing. She shared with me:

*I also realized I was in a good situation though to help heal myself because I was retired, I don't have any children at home, we had the financial resources to get the therapy, my husband is still working. I had so much time just to look after myself.*

Jenny recognizes that healing may have taken longer in different circumstances. She told me:

*I know, not everybody, when they start their healing journey or during their journey is in that situation as well. People might have children, people might be in school, ... people might not be even in a safe environment, which would be very difficult to try and heal, and so I did have all those things in my favour.*

Jenny feels very fortunate to have a supportive family and to have had the time and resources to support her healing, but she does also joke sometimes that "maybe after 37 years [she deserved] some good luck!"

### **I Don't Call it Pain Anymore**

Something that stood out in my conversation with Jenny was the fact that she does not use the word pain anymore, which started after she read *The Way Out*. She told me:

*After reading the book, I don't call it pain anymore. These sensations are not going to hurt me. They're not. I don't enjoy having them, I wish they weren't there, but they're not doing any damage. So, when I finally realized that about myself, the fear just plummeted, and for me, the fear was, now I know, like it was such a contributing factor, over all those years.*

Jenny's changing relationship with sensations, along with her broader learning about pain, led her to begin reengaging in life—in a paced way. As an example, she told me about her experience getting a bike and starting to ride again:

*I didn't get on the bike and go 30 kilometers. I went three blocks. Did I get sensations in my back? Yes, but first of all, I was expecting to get them and second of all, I wasn't afraid of them at all. I would lean into pleasant sensations then, sometimes visualization, sometimes just the nature that I was biking by, but just over and over, every time the sensation came, I would lean into a pleasant sensation. There was no fear, and I would just keep going, and then the next day I would go six blocks, and the next day I would go nine blocks.*

For most of her life, when sensations arose Jenny responded in a very different way. When she was away from home, she told me she would have thought something like, “Oh my gosh, like here we go again. How bad is it going to get today? Where am I going to be able to lie out flat?” If she woke up in pain, her response used to be: “The day is a total write-off, the day is, it's terrible because I'm in pain already, and how am I going to do this?” The lack of fear she feels around her sensations now is rooted in her faith that they will pass. She told me: “It went away, and it will go away the next time. It will go away every time that it comes because I have the tools now.”

## **The Brain is Fascinating**

Not only does Jenny now meet her sensations with an absence of fear, but she also brings a sense of curiosity and wonder to when these sensations arise in her body. As an example, Jenny told me about a time when she recently woke up in the night experiencing sensations. It was the night before she was going to be interviewed by a physician about her chronic pain recovery experience. She described the moment to me:

*I woke up in the night to use the washroom, and I definitely had sensations in the back of my neck and in my lower back, and I laughed because I knew that they were there because I was going to speak with the doctor, so I knew my brain was a little uncomfortable. I'm more of an introvert, and I was going to have to meet somebody I don't know and kind of talk about a personal journey I guess, so I kind of like in my head, I laughed that they were there because I was like, oh my gosh because the brain is fascinating, it really is fascinating.*

Another example Jenny shared with me was about having a pain flare-up around the Christmas holidays. She told me: “Christmas was not a safe environment in my childhood.” Even though she has been in a safe environment since she married her husband when she was 21 years old, she still feels the echoes of the Christmas stress she experienced in her early life during this time of year. It now makes sense to her that her sensations might flare up around this time of year.

## **Understanding Trauma**

Through the psychotherapy she did, Jenny also worked with another newer psychological therapy for chronic pain called Emotional Awareness and Expression Therapy (EAET), which targets the trauma, stress, and relationship problems that are found in many people with chronic pain. This work helped Jenny to understand the relationship between her sensations and her early life Christmas experiences, and it also led her to more fully experience her emotions. She told me:

*I repressed my emotions my entire life, and I never knew what it meant to feel an emotion in your body. I only ever thought an emotion cognitively, and then I would think it for a very brief time, and then I would just repress it, ignore it, pretend it wasn't there.*

In growing her capacity to feel her feelings, Jenny has experienced a new joy in life, “a joy that [she has] never experienced before.” And the quality of her relationships began to change. Jenny told me: “Even with my closest friends, I was still always wearing the shield.” Throughout her life, she had been trying to hide how much she was suffering from others. She told me that when she was out and about, she would put on a mask of being okay. She said, “I was afraid to let people know how much I really was suffering because in part I thought that might crack me.” Elaborating, she shared: “There were times when I thought I might just have a total breakdown.” Her relational experiences without the mask of being okay are so different. She told me: “I just find my relationship with people has just changed so much, and I just feel so light, like so light and free.”

### **Being the Person She was Meant to Be**

With the drastic reduction in both fear and pain, Jenny’s day-to-day life looks very different. She is back to doing her own housework and grocery shopping, she is participating in multiple sport and exercise programs, and she is attending whatever social events she wants to. But for Jenny, being able to do all these things are more like side effects of the true healing that she has experienced—which is more about her state of being. She told me: “I’m so at peace, and I feel like I’ve finally become the person I was always meant to be.” Elaborating further, she said:

*I feel like I finally discovered my authentic self because for so many years I was hiding behind, pretending that everything was all right, that I really feel like I never had the opportunity to be who I was really meant to be.*

### **Jenny’s Definition of Recovery**

Jenny considers herself to be recovered because her symptoms are no longer chronic. She shared with me:

*It doesn’t mean that I never ever experience symptoms because I occasionally do get an acute symptom or two, especially if I am in a new situation or am out of my comfort zone. When this happens, my brain goes on high alert and may create symptoms—but the symptoms now would only last a few minutes, a few hours, or perhaps even a few days but then they fade away, and I once again become symptom-free.*

Woven into this experience of her symptoms no longer being chronic is Jenny’s certainty that the symptoms that do arise will go away. She has witnessed them go away and deeply believes that she now has the tools to make them go away time and time again.

### **Sharing Her Secret**

Contributing to her community and giving back in some way has always been important to Jenny, and after finding success with mindbody approaches to chronic pain, she wants to make others aware of these approaches. She told me, “I just feel like I discovered a big secret and so many people don’t know about it.” And she spoke about how helping others gives a sense of meaning to the years she spent in pain: “I think it kind of gives me a purpose of why I suffered so long—to try and help others discover this modality sooner.”

In addition to things like participating in this research, Jenny has also reached out to the practitioners she saw through her journey with pain to let them know about the success she has found with mindbody approaches. She wrote emails, and when she did not have email addresses, she sent letters. She was “very disappointed to report that only two of them were open and willing to hear about [her] success with mindbody therapies.” The resistance she has encountered in trying to educate others about mindbody approaches for chronic pain likely are a factor in why it took her so long to learn about them.

### **Jenny’s Advice for Others**

Jenny believes that “without a doubt traditional medicine has failed chronic pain patients,” and she encourages others “to start thinking outside the box.” She told me: “Self-compassion was a big part of my healing journey,” and Jenny encourages others to “learn to be self-compassionate.” She recommends a gratitude journal and learning to meditate or be mindful. She also emphasized the value of orienting to pleasant or pleasurable things, such as looking out a window, listening to music, or watching a comedy show. Jenny’s personal experience is a testament to the possibility of a remarkable and unexpected recovery, even after decades of struggling with pain. And she told me: “I still wake up every day in gratitude for this new life that I have.”