

Part 3 PHYSICAL PROBLEMS

In this section there is only one chapter (Fibromyalgia), because the discussion of this issue will set forth principles that apply to other physical problems.

Fibromyalgia

What Is Fibromyalgia?

Fibromyalgia is a condition with no apparent cause in which a person experiences pain throughout the body for at least three months at a time. Most patients (80 percent to 85 percent) are middleage females who experience tenderness in several areas of the body. The name given this disease is simply a translation of the symptoms into Latin: *fibro* means “connective tissue,” *my* means “muscle,” and *algia* means “pain.” If a person complains of muscle pain in the connective tissue and doctors cannot discover a cause, she is diagnosed with fibromyalgia.

For about a hundred years doctors have been searching to discover the causes and to date have been unable to do so. Diagnosis is based completely on the reports of the patient, so fibromyalgia does not follow the classic disease model. (For a condition to be correctly labeled as a disease there must be objective evidence of dysfunction or abnormality in body tissue.)

As yet, there is no generally accepted theory regarding either the cause or the treatment of fibromyalgia. Perhaps the most popular theory is that it is a sensory amplification syndrome—a defect in pain processing in which the brain accentuates pain signals. That theory seems plausible, although there are no scientific facts to support it.

This disease has no known cure, so the focus is on relief of symptoms. A staggering number of treatments have been tried, and sometimes have had a placebo effect, but without longterm results. There is no generally agreed-upon treatment. Many researchers have recently suggested that adequate sleep and specific exercises may provide some relief. Pain medication is also commonly used.

The normal pattern is for the symptoms to fluctuate but not to become progressively worse. (The fluctuation is not affected by treatment.)

How to Counsel Someone

Who Is Suffering

For people who come to you with this or any other physical problem, do two things: (1) urge them to follow sound medical advice from a good doctor, and (2) teach them the biblical response to suffering.

Do not become an armchair physician. Saying to someone you are counseling that fibromyalgia is not a disease according to the classic definition tends to communicate that you do not take the problem seriously. Keep in mind, whatever the cause of fibromyalgia,

there is no question that the pain is real—just as real as pain caused by a physical disease. Never assume a symptom is imaginary; assume the person is telling the truth about the pain.

One thing is certain: Fibromyalgia is related to the way a person deals with stress. Onset of symptoms is often connected to some type of stress, and the way the body is affected is related to how that stress is handled. A high percentage of fibromyalgia sufferers also suffer from depression and psychiatric disorders. According to three separate studies, disability resulting from fibromyalgia appears to be related to pay scale and job satisfaction. The less a person likes her job and the less money she makes, the more likely this condition is to keep her from being able to work.

To effectively help people who have to live with the pain of fibromyalgia, it is important to teach them how to respond correctly to suffering.

- Shift their focus from the symptoms to the God who sent the symptoms (Deut. 32:39).
- Take the emphasis off of relief. It is fine to ask God for relief, but people should never demand it. Instead, they should put their hope in the Lord and spend what little energy they have on applying biblical principles rather than seeking relief.
- Ask questions that guide them toward the truth: “Is it correct to say that God is in control, and He does only good things? God could have prevented this; why didn’t He?” Help people who are suffering see what is happening to them as the intentional, purposeful work of their loving heavenly Father.
- Show them how it is possible to minister while suffering (Jesus ministered even while on the cross).
- Help them develop true contentment even in the midst of their suffering.

Chapter Summary

For physical problems:

1. Urge people to see a doctor.
2. Teach them the right response to suffering.