

WHAT TO SAY  
WHEN

*She  
Has a  
Chronic  
Illness*

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*“I was just told I have fibromyalgia. That explains my pain, but what do I do now? The doctor said I would have it for the rest of my life. How am I supposed to live in pain every day?”*

“My chronic migraines are getting worse. I’ve tried all the medications, but they don’t help much. I feel so hopeless and frustrated.”

“I’ve gone to so many doctors, and they can’t tell me what’s wrong. I’m tired of feeling terrible. I keep begging the Lord to help, but nothing changes.”

Unfortunately, the comments above reflect the experiences of many women. When illness turns serious, or as sickness and pain linger and become “chronic,” a variety of spiritual questions and struggles inevitably arise: Why has this happened? Why to me? Where is God, and why hasn’t he healed me yet? Where can I find hope and comfort? Is it possible to find joy in the midst of my pain?

As a friend of someone experiencing chronic illness or daily pain, you may have questions too. How do you respond to difficult questions about pain and suffering? What is helpful to do or say, and not hurtful? What concerns and practical needs arise during a chronic illness?

And, most importantly, how can you encourage your friend to look to the Lord for strength to endure? In the pages that follow, we will answer these questions and discover how to help our suffering friends find purpose, comfort, and hope in the face of bodily suffering.

### *The Heart of the Struggle*

In order to understand how to help a suffering friend, we must first understand the source of pain and illness. When God created the world, it was perfect. Everything, including the human body, functioned exactly as it was designed. There was no illness, disease, or death. Tragically, when Adam and Eve sinned, all creation was cursed. What was perfect and “very good” (Gen. 1:31) is now tainted and prey to degeneration, decay, corruption, and death (Rom. 5:12). Now, because of the effects of sin, genes mutate, chromosomes are misplaced, organs in the body malfunction, bones break, and pain pathways misfire.

On the one hand, sometimes these physical consequences are sudden and brief. This is called an “acute” illness. Though an acute illness may have a significant impact on someone’s life, it usually resolves without the need for ongoing care (for example, the common cold, the flu, appendicitis, and broken bones).

Chronic disease, on the other hand, is a long-term illness or condition that typically lasts a year or more—or even a lifetime. Symptoms appear either gradually or

suddenly and often ebb and flow over time. The illness has a significant impact on daily life, and ongoing medical care is necessary. Treatment plans are also dynamic, meaning they may change over time.

There is a spectrum of chronic disease. Some diseases, while challenging to manage, are common and well-understood, with multiple treatment options available to those who suffer from them (for example, asthma, heart disease, and diabetes). Other conditions are more complex and difficult to diagnose and treat—such as multiple sclerosis, fibromyalgia, migraines, POTS (postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome), and lupus. All diseases have varying degrees of severity, and each person perceives pain and illness differently. One person may find their illness to be manageable, with minimal impact on their quality of life, while another person with that same illness may find that it is life-altering and debilitating, with no available remedy.

### **The Progression of Chronic Illness**

Several years ago, I had a very full and busy life working as a nurse-midwife. In the space of two months, my life was completely interrupted by major illness. I felt as if my world had literally been turned upside down—instead of taking care of patients, I was now the patient. I was walking the path of severe, lifelong, and life-altering illness, just as I had walked with many patients throughout my career.

As I recalled my patients' experiences with illness, talked to others with chronic disease, and observed my own journey, several commonalities emerged. First, those with chronic illness often experience similar stages in the progression of their illness. Second, while each person's experience is different, similar emotional, spiritual, and practical challenges often surface in each stage of illness. When you understand these common stages and challenges, you will be able to pray more knowledgeably, ask better questions, anticipate potential struggles, and provide more meaningful support for friends with chronic illness.

The four stages below are simply a general guide. While the most common concerns and challenges are mentioned, your friend may have additional or different struggles. As we explore these stages, remember that chronic illness is not linear: Symptoms change, new symptoms may appear, and your friend may circle back to previous stages.

*Before diagnosis: What's wrong with me?* In this first stage, your friend experiences symptoms and begins to look for a diagnosis. Sometimes this is a straightforward process: She sees a doctor, has a few tests run, and gets a diagnosis. In other cases, the path to diagnosis is very challenging: She sees multiple doctors, spends long hours researching and seeking out answers, undergoes multiple tests, and perhaps even travels for care. This is all taking place while

your friend continues to experience symptoms, which may be debilitating.

Confusion and fear are common reactions during this phase. “What are these symptoms, and where did they come from? What’s wrong with my body? Will I feel like this forever?” Your friend may feel betrayed by her own body, especially if she has been healthy previously. She may struggle as she wonders, “Why did this illness happen to me? How is this part of God’s plan? Is God punishing me for sin?”

Frustration is also common if test after test is negative, doctors don’t have answers, and there are long waits between appointments. She may feel abandoned by the Lord and struggle to remain hopeful amid these disappointments. She may experience anxiety: “Where are these symptoms coming from? Is it serious? Will my symptoms get worse? How will I cope?” As she prays for clarity regarding her condition, she may also wonder why the Lord is not answering her prayer by giving her a diagnosis. She may feel like her situation is hopeless and that no one, including the Lord, can “fix” her body. As she shares her concerns, you may get more clarity by asking what she finds most frustrating about her situation. With wisdom and sensitivity, ask where she is looking for hope and if she sees the Lord working in her life even in the midst of her illness.

Your friend may also feel that she has to “prove” she is ill. Many sources of pain and illness have symptoms that

are not outwardly visible. These “invisible illnesses” can lead friends, family members, and sometimes even doctors to dismiss and invalidate what she is experiencing. This is especially true when test results are inconclusive and a diagnosis is hard to find. Your friend may be reluctant to share the depth of her pain because she is afraid you will disbelieve her or think she’s overreacting. She may struggle to remember that the Lord knows her intimately and cares about her struggle. You can create an environment where she feels safe and welcome to share freely by asking thoughtful and specific questions to understand her experience, acknowledging what she says and reassuring her that you believe her.\*

*Diagnosis: What is the cause?* In this second stage, after weeks, months, or sometimes years, your friend with chronic illness receives a diagnosis or a partial explanation for her symptoms. In some cases, she may find that there is no known explanation for how she feels.

Whether or not she receives a concrete diagnosis, your friend is likely experiencing a range of emotions as she realizes that her symptoms will most likely remain unresolved. She will need to adjust to a new way of thinking and living.

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\* Suggested questions to help you explore each stage of illness are given on pages 53–56.

If she is diagnosed with a specific chronic condition, she initially may feel relief, and even rejoice and praise God, especially if the search has been long—she has finally found an answer that explains what is happening to her! Alternatively, she may feel upset and find it difficult to trust God’s plan as she begins to realize the permanency of her symptoms and limitations. Many women experience both types of feelings in waves. Their view of God and his goodness may change dramatically as they process the diagnosis and its implications for their lives. Know that this is often a time of seesawing emotions. Recognize that now is likely not a good time to try to “fix” the situation or correct her thinking; instead, encourage your friend to express her honest reactions as she experiences them.

As time passes and reality sets in, your friend may begin to feel significant anxiety regarding the progression of her illness and its implications for her and her family. She may worry over concerns such as “Did I pass my illness on to my children?” “Will my illness put a strain on my relationships?” and “How will I support myself if I can’t work?” Trusting the Lord for both the painful present and an uncertain future will be an ongoing challenge for a woman facing a chronic diagnosis.

However, it is very possible that she will receive a partial diagnosis—or no diagnosis at all. When this happens, frustration magnifies. Questions and doubts about her