



## Metaphor

1. What we experience because of chronic physical or mental illness can not only be difficult to explain, but difficult for those who don't experience it to understand. But there is a tool that can help: metaphors.

Let's begin by looking at the kinds of words often used to describe chronic illness and its effects:

- battle
- enemy
- siege
- warrior
- weapons
- fight
- soldier
- survivor
- ticking time bomb
- struggle
- front line (of health care)
- attack
- magic bullet
- invasive
- vulnerable
- conqueror
- battleground
- dance
- journey
- puzzle
- pummeled
- shadow

- ghost
- plague
- grey
- ashen
- lead balloon
- washed out
- voyage
- malfunction
- weeps (i.e.: a wound weeps)
- cocoon/butterfly

Military metaphors, like many of the words above, are among the oldest metaphors used in medicine and they remain the most common.

2. List all the words you've used to describe your illness.

3. Anatole Broyard said, "Metaphors may be as necessary to illness as they are to literature, as comforting to the patient as his own bathrobe and slippers."

Why? Because medical metaphors:

- quickly illustrate pain or other symptoms
- foster greater understanding
- enhance communication
- convey emotion
- focus attention
- motivate to action

According to Orson Scott Card, “Metaphors have a way of holding the most truth in the least space.”

That’s an interesting statement. My kids’ doctors frequently use metaphors to help them understand specific aspects of their illnesses, because metaphors are not only efficient, but also easily remembered.

Here’s an example: An anxiety/panic disorder is like a smoke alarm. When a smoke alarm detects smoke, it doesn’t stop to work out whether it’s from burned toast or a fire; it simply goes off. A panic disorder is like that too. The brain perceives a threat and doesn’t stop to work out whether it’s a real threat or not. It just jumps into fight-or-flight mode. Feeling panicked doesn’t mean something bad is happening. It’s just an overly sensitive smoke detector.

Chip and Dan Heath, authors of *Made to Stick*, offer this: “Explanations require lots of attention, but attention is scarce. So don’t explain. Instead, anchor in what people already know.”

This is significant. If we can explain our pain and other symptoms in a concise and familiar way, we begin to bridge the communication gap. Yet that’s not an easy task, as Gary Young explains: “No shared human experience resists articulation more than physical pain.”

The 10-Point Pain Scale may *quantify* our pain, but it doesn’t describe or *qualify* the pain, which doesn’t help others to understand pain’s overwhelming impact on our lives. The 10-Point Pain Scale is an inadequate and imprecise measure of chronic pain.

In an address to the New York Academy of Medicine, Cynthia Ozick, said, “The function of medical metaphor is to allow those without pain to understand what it is to suffer.”

That’s why we need medical metaphors — “to allow those without pain to understand what it is to suffer.”

Well-thought-out medical metaphors will not only spark better communication with our medical professionals, but they will also be a gift to others, helping them to better understand what we experience every day.

So, what *is* a metaphor?

A metaphor is a figure of speech that compares two unrelated objects or concepts, which share a specific characteristic.

We'll start with three easy examples:

- She was *boiling* mad.
- His words were *pearls* of wisdom.
- My final project was a *breeze*.

In the first example, *she* cannot literally boil, but because almost everyone knows what water looks like when it boils, it's an apt description.

In the second example, words cannot be pearls, but again, most people are familiar with pearls and their inherent worth, so the metaphor works.

In the last example, a project cannot be a breeze, but we all know what a breeze is, so it gives us a clear understanding that the final project was easily completed.

Mardy Grothe, author of *I Never Metaphor I Didn't Like*, says, "A metaphor is a kind of magical changing room — where one thing, for a moment, becomes another, and in that moment is seen in a whole new way. As soon as something old is seen in a new way, it stimulates a torrent of new thoughts and associations, almost as if a mental floodgate has been lifted."

Here are several well-known examples:

- "Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life." — Pablo Picasso
- "Conscience is a man's compass." — Vincent Van Gogh
- "All our words are but crumbs that fall down from the feast of the mind." — Khalil Gibran
- "Let us be grateful to people who make us happy, they are the charming gardeners who make our souls blossom." — Marcel Proust
- "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair. / It's had tacks in it, / And splinters, / And boards torn up, / And places with no carpet on the floor —/ Bare." — Langston Hughes

Now it's time to write your own metaphors.

### Tips to help you begin:

- What specifically are you describing? (e.g. : pain, fatigue, nausea, brain fog, etc.)
- What characteristics does it have? How does it make you feel? Does it have a smell or taste associated with it? Can you see it? Write everything that comes to mind.
- What object or idea shares some of the qualities of your pain or symptom? Challenge yourself to stretch beyond the commonly used metaphors for pain/symptoms.
- Is there a tone or mood you want to convey? Does a color, shape, or physical characteristic help establish that?
- With your brainstorming complete, choose an object or concept to turn into a metaphor.
- Read it out loud. Listen to the sounds, rhythm, and cadence of the words.
- Does the metaphor make sense to you?
- Do the sounds of the words match the feeling or tone you want to convey?
- Metaphors can be used as:
  - Nouns:     *“All the world’s a stage.” — Shakespeare*  
                  *“I’m a riddle in nine syllables.” — Sylvia Plath*  
                  *“The Moon’s a snowball ...” — Vachel Lindsay*
  - Verbs:     *“Batten down the hatches.”*  
                  *“The news clutched at her throat.”*  
                  *“The sea bit her ankles.”*

Have some fun working on medical metaphors over the next several days. Let them simmer and percolate. Play with the words. And when you have one or several you like, write them here:

4. Cost itself is a metaphor. There is a significant financial cost associated with chronic illness, but there are often significant non-financial costs as well, such as:

- loss of physical mobility
- loss of independence
- loss of mental acuity
- loss of social activities
- loss of energy
- sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell and/or speech impairments
- loss of specific foods (e.g.: malabsorption of food and/or medications requiring a very specific diet)
- loss of intimacy
- loss of self-worth/self-confidence
- loss of bodily functions (e.g.: bladder/bowel incontinence; inability to regulate body temperature or heart rate; loss of strength, balance, endurance, dexterity and/or flexibility)
- loss of friendships
- loss of interest (due to accompanying depression, loneliness and isolation)

Take some time today and list the losses you've experienced due to chronic illness.

5. Now think in terms of metaphor, how could you describe those losses to others using something they are already familiar with? If you're stuck, think about colors, textures, physical properties, seasons, weather, cooking or baking terms, sports terms, or construction words.

Sometimes it helps to use a thesaurus. You can start with a word that is close and often with a little digging, land on a word that fits just right. Google "thesaurus" and you'll find several good, free on-line thesauruses.