

METAPHOR THE LANGUAGE OF PAIN

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 metaphors can be a useful tool.

A Place to Begin

Look at the kinds of words often used to describe chronic illness and its effects:

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|---------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| • battle | • magic bullet | • plague |
| • enemy | • invasive | • grey |
| • siege | • vulnerable | • ashen |
| • warrior | • conqueror | • lead balloon |
| • weapons | • battleground | • washed out |
| • fight | • dance | • voyage |
| • soldier | • journey | • malfunction |
| • survivor | • puzzle | • cocoon/butterfly |
| • ticking time bomb | • pummeled | • attack |
| • struggle | • shadow | • ghost |

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

Consider all the words you've used to describe your illness. Why? Because medical metaphors:

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

*Metaphors have a way of holding
the most truth in the least space.*
Orson Scott Card

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

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

Someone cannot literally boil, but because almost everyone knows what water looks like when it boils, it's an apt description.

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

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.

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?

Have some fun working on medical metaphors. Let them simmer and percolate. Play with the words.

List the losses you've experienced due to chronic illness.

In terms of metaphor, how could you describe those losses to others using something they are already familiar with? Think about colors, textures, physical properties, seasons, weather, cooking or baking terms, sports terms, or construction words.