



Texas Orthopedics,
Sports & Rehabilitation Associates
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Having Peace with Your Pain

I've been an orthopedic surgeon in Austin for 23 years and as my practice and I have aged I have come to believe in a different set of rules and expectations for both me and my patients than I had when I first hung up my shingle.

Some of my partners will disagree. They're still young and have yet to feel the pain of arthritis. They're mostly guys and will likely never experience some of the repetitive strain disorders females experience.

But here's the bottom line: humans weren't meant to last as long as we do. As an organism we just weren't put together to stay around for 80 years. The average age of death for Americans is over 80.

Look at the archeological record. No one is finding fossils of *old* cavemen and cavewomen. Women died in childbirth. If a man sprained his ankle he was dinner for a bigger predator! People died when they were 20.

By 1900 the average age of death had only doubled to 40 for women. Men lasted a little longer. Why? Most likely because clever women were figuring out how to control their birth rates to a certain extent. We all remember Scarlett O'Hara, once realizing that with the birth of her first child came an increase in her girth. What did she do? She moved into another bedroom. Of course Rhett Butler wasn't going to stand for that. He just busted in the door. But fortunately (or maybe unfortunately...depending on your perspective) most men were not like Rhett and they respected those closed doors. I remember my grandparents used to sleep in twin beds. And guess what? My parents each had only one sibling! Maybe twin beds worked...

Another reason for a slightly longer life back in 1900 was that more people had roofs over their heads. And someone figured out that amputating legs was better than dying. A thoughtful doctor realized that his patients lived longer if he washed his hands more often!

But what happened between 1900 and now? Real birth control. Anesthesia. Surgery. C-sections. Antibiotics! Roofs over our heads. Seat belts. We're living longer and longer. There's no end in sight. We're going to find that fountain of youth someday. But we were never put together to last this long. And what's the point of these long lives if we're going to be in pain?

We see these documentaries on octogenarians who run the Boston marathon or some little group of Japanese mountain people who look like they're 40 when they're 100, and we think we should be able to be like that. But what they don't show you are the 10,000 people who tried to train for the Boston

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marathon and couldn't because of stress fractures, iliotibial band syndrome and degenerative meniscus tears.

So, what's my point here? Do I just not want to see any patients? No, I love to see patients. It's what I do! But the point is...we're hunter-gatherers, and were made to last about 20 years.

We're not marathon runners, football players, sky divers, or 8-hour a day key-boarders. We're hunter-gatherers.

And I find myself giving this lecture over and over to my many patients who suffer from degenerative disorders of their bones and joints, as well as those patients who suffer from repetitive strain disorders.

No cave man/woman ever lived long enough to suffer from greater trochanteric bursitis, shoulder rotator cuff impingement syndrome, plantar fasciitis or degenerative meniscus tears.

If it's frustrating for me to treat some of these conditions, it is certainly frustrating for my patients to have them. I've personally experienced many of these repetitive strain conditions. Frankly we have to learn to have a certain level of peace with them. We have to look at pain from a different perspective. We're lucky to have lived long enough to experience these conditions. If we are fortunate enough to be treated and saved from a heart attack, we may live long enough to experience some other disease. It could be a rotator cuff tear. It could be cancer.

Sometimes my patients ask, "Why am I having these problems? My grandparents and my parents didn't have them!" There are several reasons for this:

-We may not inherit the same set of genes each of our parents had. Just as your eyes or your hair might not look exactly like either of your parents, your muscles, tendons and joints may not be the same either.

-We live differently than our parents and grandparents. As a whole, we are more active than our parents were. We started playing organized sports at a younger age. We do some crazy, harmful exercises our parents didn't even think to do. We continued playing sports late into life. As a whole we are larger and heavier than our ancestors. And we live longer so unfortunately, we have longer to suffer!

-Our expectations are different than our forefather's were. Our grandparents did not have an expectation of being treated and "cured" of their aches and pains. So why complain? Why go to the doctor. Everyone tells us that we can be cured. There is treatment. And there is! But because of that, we have an expectation of wellness and therefore we complain.

You will most certainly be able to think of a situation which contradicts my analysis. My parents are both in great shape and they're out tango dancing without an ache or pain. Well, in my most educated opinion...that's just good luck...for me and for them!