

Growing Through Pain

By Abe Brown, CCF President

I was doing my daily 10K run the other day, when I glanced over at a local playground area. My glance became a gaze, as I saw a thick black foam lining the “floor” of the playground area. Fortunately, I am not the fastest runner on the planet and thus, got a nice long look as I ran by. Under the monkey bars, swings and slides, was a protective padding that looked like it was about two or three inches thick.

Apparently, this is the latest fad in playground design and builds. To protect our children from nasty falls and unexpected drops, and the accompanying bumps, bruises and lacerations, we have padded and protected the ground. When they fall, rather than hitting the ground or sand or gravel, they gently bounce off the foam. It is pain free. They can play, but without worrying about pain.

In no way do I mean to pass judgment on this remarkable innovation. I am not a medical doctor, nor am I a paediatrician. Perhaps this “playground protection” is precisely what the doctor ordered. As a parent myself, I can bear witness to the over-riding passion we all have to keep our children safe and protected from harm, and the anguish we feel when they experience any form of pain.

However, moving into the realm of adults, there can be no doubt in our current culture, we make great efforts to create a life without pain. It is clear that pain is to be avoided at all costs. Almost every ad and marketing piece speaks about a utopian concept of the “good life” where we can navigate the difficulties of staying in shape and losing weight and planning for retirement and raising our children without pain. In the world of slick marketing and airbrushed images, life, career, relationships, and success all flow with effortless waves of bliss, when you buy this product or that service. All we need to do is sign up for whatever product or service is being sold, offer our credit card number, and we will have all we want in life, but without any pain.

The truth is that growth, personal development, and maturity are almost never without pain. The moments when we experience our greatest adversity can often become our season of greatest triumph. When the pain elevates, our development accelerates. When hardship increases, growth steps up. Aristotle said it like this: “We cannot learn without pain”.

A few years ago, I went through the greatest period of darkness and pain in my life. I lost much of what I had worked so hard for. I made poor choices and as a result, ended up in a moment of pain and heartbreak that I honestly did not think would ever end. But it did end. And not only did it end, I stand today stronger and more secure than I have ever been. My perspective has been shaped, my attitudes adjusted, my choices re-aligned, my grace renewed. I am a deeper and fuller person than I was before. And pain was the process.

I learned that pain is inevitable. But misery is optional. Pain is an inevitable part of life, and is an integral component of the growth process. I learned things in the place of pain I could never learn in the place of pleasure.

How Do We Grow Through Pain?

1) Pain Brings Clarity Of Focus

Pain has the interesting benefit of sharpening our focus. I discovered this one day when I was building a fence with a nail gun, and was so comfortable with it that I took my eyes off what I was doing and began to use the nail gun on auto-pilot. Not a good idea! The pain I experienced when I grazed my hand with the 2 inch nail brought me back to a place of focus and clarity. What was most important became clear, and I was able to finish building the fence without distraction.

See in life, sometimes pain is crucial to help us focus again. John Maxwell said it like this: "Everything you now do is something you have chosen to do. Some people don't want to believe that. But if you're over age twenty-one, your life is what you're making of it. To change your life, you need to change your priorities."

2) Pain Puts Things Into Perspective

Pain has the important quality of helping us put everything into perspective. We all tend to get a little whiny and to feel sorry for ourselves. Pain helps us to put things in perspective, so we don't confuse an inconvenience with a legitimate problem. Robert Fulghum said it a little more clearly: "If you break your neck, if you have nothing to eat, if your house is on fire, then you got a problem. Everything else is inconvenience."

See, our culture has conditioned us to actually believe that we can go through life without any struggles, hardships or difficulties. Some of us really believe this, and therefore we are surprised when they occur. Let me be clear. The problem is not that there are problems. The problem is expecting we will not have problems, and then thinking that having problems is a problem. And, being surprised when they occur. Pain helps us understand this.

3) Pain Forces Us To Make A Choice

When faced with pain, we are always faced with choices. The choice pain offers is not only the choice between pain and misery, but also between mediocrity and magnificence, average and amazing, apathetic living or passionate living. Pain causes us to recalibrate, look in the mirror, and ask, "What's most important to me," Pain forces us to make a choice. And choices are crucial to growth and maturity.

Jim Rohn described what I am sharing like this: "We must all suffer one of two things: the pain of discipline or the pain of regret or disappointment." When faced with pain, we rise up and become all we can be, or we shrink back and live far less than our full potential. Pain often comes to help us to close the gap between our full potential and our current performance, but it's all about our choices.

There is one thing that we all have in common. That is... at some point in our lives, we will face adversity. It's not a matter of if, but... when. I have come to realize that the difference in our success and failure is not chance, but choice. Because when adversity strikes, it's not what happens that will determine our destiny; it's how we react to what happens.

4) Pain Attracts Support & Partners

One of the most amazing and sweet things about pain is the support, partnership and help it attracts. In no way am I talking about moping around, crying the blues, and being a drain on everyone else. What I discovered, when I embraced my pain, and engaged the process of life-change the pain was producing, people were attracted to the process and attracted to supporting and partnering with me. At a crazy time in my life in the past, I would try to carry hardship alone, even hiding it from others. Now, it simply is what it is. And, some people, who are designed to help and care and support, come alongside me and help me to get through it. Thanks! The healthy and strong individual is the one who asks for help when he needs it.

David Joseph Schwartz said this: "Here is the basic rule for winning success. Let's mark it in the mind and remember it. The rule is: Success depends on the support of other people. The only hurdle between you and what you want to be is the support of other people." This is so true, and when we honestly embrace the process of pain, people come alongside to support us. Truthfully, a friend is someone who understands your past, believes in your future, and accepts you, just the way you are. Pain brings these friends to the surface.

5) Pain Is Our Greatest Place Of Gain

There is no doubt that for most of us, pain is our greatest place of gain. Just like staying in shape is difficult with sweat and effort, so personal growth and maturity is slow when everything in our lives is perfect. Lance Armstrong, , said this: "Pain is temporary. It may last a minute, or an hour, or a day, or a year, but eventually it will subside and something else will take its place. If I quit, however, it lasts forever."

The single difference between pain that grows us, and pain that simply hurts us, is our attitude. We need to consciously choose, in a place of pain, to not blame others. To not feel sorry for ourselves. To embrace the pain and the lessons our pain is trying to teach us. As Oprah Winfrey said, "Turn your wounds into wisdom."

The reality is, at some point, we all leave the padded mat of the playground and have to face the rough and tumble and pain of life without protection and at times, without support. Let's do so, knowing our pain can be our greatest place of gain. And don't be surprised when life throws pain your way, because when pain elevates, our development accelerates.
