

Chronic Pain

Interview with Stephen, Therese and Joash Abraham

'It feels like there's a truck parked on my leg and it's just been crushed. I can try and mask it with medication, try and ignore it, but it's always there.'

'His whole personality has changed, the medication affects his thought processes, emotionally he's quite fragile at times, so really you know from the man that I married he's extremely different.'

Richard: One in five Australians suffers chronic pain. It can be a debilitating condition, leading to personality changes and a heavy strain on relationships. How do you cope with pain that never goes away? Today's guests are Stephen and Therese, who will share their journey of managing the effects of chronic pain. Stay tuned to hear how it's affected their relationships, lifestyle, and purpose in life.

Interviewer: Stephen, Therese and Joash, thanks for joining us today. I'd like to take you back to 2003, before Stephen was affected by chronic pain. How did you feel about life at that time?

Stephen: It seems like such a dream I had a long time ago, like aspirations with ministry, church planting and travel and family, things to look forward to.

Therese: I think we felt that life had just fallen into place. We moved out here, we had Joash and life was just kind of getting to this is what we've dreamt of.

Interviewer: So tell us about the events that began to change all that.

Stephen: It was a couple of days before Christmas in 2003, a group from the school where I was school pastor went on a day's sporting activity which was actually paint ball which I loved. And I got back and was sore. I just took medication and got through Christmas Eve's service. And then Christmas Day, I was in the emergency ward screaming loudly, there was something very wrong. Yeah, that was the beginning. And then it was trying to work out I guess exactly what it was that had broken. My disc had ruptured and as it began to heal scar tissue formed all around the nerve down my left leg and couldn't be removed.

Interviewer: Can you describe how it feels?

Stephen: It feels like there's a truck parked on my leg and it's just been crushed. The more active I am, the more I move around, the more it flares it up and the worse it gets. At this stage this kind of injury can't be repaired. There's some good medication which helps me manage it but that's it. It's just something we have to live with.

Interviewer: Therese, how has the situation affected you?

Therese: I've become his carer and his protector. That role of changing from being a wife to that element of carer, that's massive and very draining at times. And then too, trying to compensate as a parent for Joash, sometimes I feel like I have to be both mum and dad because Stephen can't do the dad things that a dad would normally do with their son.

Interviewer: And how have you felt about those changes?

Therese: I went through a time of a lot of anger, a lot of anger at God for why did this have to happen to us? We had the world at our feet. But I think I learned that just continually asking that is just wasting time and you just keep living in this anger and this frustration that is not quality life. But it took quite a while to come to terms with and just let go of that anger.

Interviewer: Stephen, how does the pain affect your quality of life?

Stephen: There's now a big cost. So if I wanna go do something or get in the car you know there's probably about two or three car trips I can make a week and if I do more than that my pain will just go through the roof. So there has to be a plan. It's impossible for us to do something spontaneous.

The house has had to change and things have had to be adapted so that I can be a shut-in successfully. Our bedroom's been redesigned so that I've got access to a computer screen and TV so I've got a window to the outside world if I can't move.

Interviewer: Therese mentioned earlier about having to be both mum and dad for Joash, how have you come to terms with the limitations on being the active dad?

Stephen: Not being able to be an active outdoors father, playing sport with my son or motorbike riding, rock climbing anything like that is out and I found that really difficult. I guess I compensate where I can be involved in Joash's life and he's very good at understanding what I can't do, he's probably better at handling it than I am.

Interviewer: Joash, do you feel like you're missing out on things with your dad?

Joash: I feel that I miss out on doing physical things with him. I play tennis at the moment, and he used to play tennis but now he can't so that's something that I miss but sometimes he'll get out on his scooter and burn around and try to get out and hit. Yeah some things I miss out on but he can do other things instead.

Interviewer: What things can you do with him?

Joash: He can play video games and that's about it but that's fine because there's a number of different games that we can play.

Stephen: Or build stuff like Minecraft and stuff

Therese: And your Lego

Stephen: Or, you know, we've a common interest in movies and music and things like that that we connect explore, enjoy together

Joash: If we're watching a TV show then if something funny happens we'll laugh our heads off

Steve: Having a wicked sense of humour helps (laughter)

Therese: A shared wicked sense of humour.

Stephen: I have a friend and we've recently been invited to another healing thing by some great guru and yeah, there are times where God miraculously heals and I don't deny that. But I think we're just over that and over living our life just thinking I'm gonna be healed, I've gotta be healed, I've gotta get over this, rather than knowing God is with us in our suffering.

Therese: And at some point it just has to be acceptance, otherwise life just passes by and you're always looking for that solution whereas I think that for us until we accepted it, we couldn't actually move forward.

Interviewer: How did you feel at the time when these attempts at healing weren't working?

Stephen: I remember feeling really gutted, absolutely gutted, and what is wrong with me that God won't heal me when you know this promise is supposedly given that you'll be healed. There's only so many times that I think you can emotionally put yourself in that vulnerable position and when it doesn't work or if it doesn't work it's absolutely shattering. I can really understand why for some people that ends their faith when that doesn't work.

Interviewer: Why hasn't it ended your faith in God?

Stephen: Suffering I think can give a different level of wisdom about your world view and how God's part of that world view. Before this, I was so naive about suffering and so naive about people with chronic medical conditions and the challenges they face and so did not understand the book of Job at all. Now I feel like I do and I've got a different world view of Christ and his suffering for humanity and his suffering for me and God's understanding of how much suffering hurts and how challenging that is. I now have that respect for what Jesus went through, Jesus understands suffering and God's not this vindictive lightning thrower out there trying to spoil everything. This is just the way life is, suffering is a part of life and God is our way of understanding that and coming to terms with it and living and moving forward. And despite all of this, having a fruitful life and a solid marriage and still being a parent and a friend and having a place in the world.

Therese: I think too, it's the support of our parents who are just such faithful, faithful Christian people who we know pray for us night and day. I think that helps feed our faith to an extent and keep us thinking yeah God is watching over us.

Interviewer: Therese, at the beginning of today's program you said that Stephen is very different to the man you married. How have you come to terms with that?

Therese: I married Stephen for better for worse, in sickness and in health and so aside from standing by those vows he is still my soul mate, he is still the person I know I'm meant to spend the rest of my life with. No matter what gets thrown at us. When one of us is down the other is usually the strong one and we just pick each other up and are just committed to seeing it through and holding our family together and showing Joash that despite struggles in life that yeah God will get you through it.

Interviewer: Stephen, what is it that gets you out of bed every morning?

Stephen: Making my wife coffee. *(laughter)* There are so many things I can't do, that the things that I can do become really important, passionately important. The one thing I can do is cook and make my wife a coffee and there's some days that's all I can really do as far as contributing to the house and the family goes. So those things become really important.

Interviewer: And how do you see your purpose in life now and into the future?

Stephen: I was pastor to a school and a church community and now my church is us three and that's where my ministry is now. And to our parents while they're alive and extended family, they're now the church that I need to care for. And enjoying my life within the limitations that I have... and there are things I can still do, and areas that will open up, and things that God has for me.

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