

Stephanie Possehl: Living with Chronic Back Pain

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Stephanie Possehl

Living with Chronic Pain

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Andrew Schorr:

Hello. I'm Andrew Schorr from Patient Power. This program is sponsored by Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

Let's talk about chronic pain, specifically chronic, debilitating back pain. That can be so terrible. It really can ruin your life if you have trouble getting dressed, walking, and certainly doing your daily activities, working. Imagine if you were a woman, 31 years old, you had your whole life in front of you, and you're a first-grade teacher and you know how active those children can be. Stephanie Possehl of Arlington Heights, Illinois, began having that kind of terrible back pain in 2003. Stephanie is with us now. Stephanie, tell us how it all began.

Stephanie:

It was just summer, and I was pretty active. We were doing some boating and on like WaveRunners on the water, and all of a sudden my back just, every day, it hurt. And I was staying in bed a lot and not doing really anything, and finally my parents said you need to see a doctor, and I thought it was nothing. And so I went and saw a doctor and I had a herniated disk right at the bottom of my back. And at first we tried noninvasive shots of cortisone, and none of that worked. So by December I went in and had a microdiscectomy.

Andrew Schorr:

Stephanie, of course you had high hopes for that surgery. How did it work out?

Stephanie:

The recovery was really hard. It was the week before Christmas, and I remember Christmas Eve I went for a little bit, and then I had to go home. And by like January, February I still felt like low

back pain when I sat or when I stood, and by May I was back, and I had another MRI and it still showed that the disk had moved a little. And I just still wasn't feeling a hundred percent then at all.

Andrew Schorr:

All this started in 2003. Here comes 2004, '05, '06, you were living in pain for a number of years.

Stephanie:

Yes. I just kept going back to the doctor, and they just kept sending me to pain management groups, and then they would just send me for injections and just pain medicines, basically.

Andrew Schorr:

This certainly wasn't a great way for a young woman to live.

Stephanie:

No, it was not. It was hard.

Andrew Schorr:

How did all this pain affect your social relationships?

Stephanie:

I was turning down a lot of activities to go out and do things, or by the time I got home from work I was just so sore all I wanted to do was just lay in bed. And I just felt bad for my friends because I was just like—I didn't want to be that girl that's always complaining. Even with my boyfriend, he would want to go to a baseball game or something, and I would just be thinking about sitting in those chairs all day. And you want to do this kind of stuff, but at the same time you would rather just lay on the couch all day, and that was very frustrating, to be 30 years old and not wanting to do anything.

Andrew Schorr:

Stephanie, let's jump ahead to 2011. You're back teaching the first grade, you're in front of the kids, you bend down for a book that you're going to read to the children. What happened?

Stephanie:

Yeah, I just bent over to grab a book, and I felt pain, I mean, it was even worse than 2003. It literally felt like I had been stabbed in the back, and the shooting pain went down all the way to my feet, and then it was like a cold feeling that went through, and then I couldn't feel my legs but my

back was—it was just throbbing. And I knew that I had an assistant coming in the room in about 10 minutes, so I was like if I can just make it 10 minutes.

And I just sat there, and luckily it was a big book, so it kind of covered my face. And, I mean, I literally just cried behind the book because I didn't know what else to do and I didn't want to scare the kids.

Andrew Schorr:

So here you are in front of the children, and you're crying in pain?

Stephanie:

Yeah, I just kind of hid my face with the book, because I didn't want them to see me or be scared. But, I mean, when my aide eventually walked in she had to help me to the door because I couldn't really feel my legs. So then they saw me and I felt bad, but I was able to go back to work and talk to them about what happened. But, yeah, they did see me hobble to the door and leave.

Andrew Schorr:

Oh, my. So you had had previous surgery, years of pain continuing, pain medicines, pain therapy, and now you're stricken with terrible pain again. What did you do next?

Stephanie:

I called my parents and I had a coworker, she drove me half way and met my parents, and then we just went straight to the hospital. And they admitted me after two rounds of narcotics and Valium. I burned through it within minutes, and then I was back to crying and screaming. So they admitted me, did an MRI, and it was the same disk came back out again, but it was sitting on the nerve.

So they kept me for five days just on a drip, and then they did a nerve root block injection to just try to block the pain, and the doctor there told me that the only surgery that I would ever have from there on out was a fusion.

Andrew Schorr:

We should tell our audience that this story does have a happy ending. Stephanie is smiling.

Stephanie:

It does have a happy ending.

Andrew Schorr:

We call this program Patient Power, and, Stephanie, you became a powerful patient. You sought a second opinion, went to see a renowned spinal surgeon at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, Tyler Koski. What did Dr. Koski tell you?

Stephanie:

I came in and I had already sent him the MRIs and everything, and his nurse had already called me, so I already felt when I went in that it was pretty organized. And he looked at it and he looked at me, and he's like, you have two options. I would do a second microdiscectomy, or you could have a fusion, but he's the choice is up to you. And I was so surprised because Northwest Community told me that no one would ever do anything but a fusion on me. So I left there feeling great because a fusion is pretty invasive, so I was excited that I could have a surgery that was less invasive.

Andrew Schorr:

So you went to have surgery again, the minimally invasive kind, because the pain was so bad.

Stephanie:

It was so bad. And he said that I could have another nerve root block injection around March because I wanted to have it at the end of the school year, and then the pain got so bad that we ended up bumping up my surgery a month because I couldn't wait until June.

Andrew Schorr:

So you had the surgery in mid May 2011, and I understand you had a very quick, positive result.

Stephanie:

Yeah, the next couple hours after surgery I took myself off the drip that they had me on and went to just pain pills. And I was supposed to stay through the weekend, and I went home on Friday. And within a week—I remember I came home, I walked right up the stairs, like nothing, like my first surgery where I had to crawl up the stairs. And within weeks I felt great. I was walking around the block, I was walking up to a mile right away. I had taken off the rest of the school year, and I was able to meet my kids at a field trip they were on because I felt that great. So it was a completely different experience than the first one.

Andrew Schorr:

We should remind people that any kind of back surgery is significant surgery, and it's certainly not a walk in the park.

Stephanie:

No, no. It wasn't like a walk in the park, but compared to the first one, it was a lot easier.

Andrew Schorr:

Stephanie, how would you describe the experience at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, first in offering you the best options and then making it happen?

Stephanie:

Right. Oh, yeah. Kristen Smith, she would e-mail me all the time, and she answered my questions within minutes. Like a Sunday night at nine o'clock, she would respond back to me. I didn't even know doctors e-mailed. When I went down to go for the surgery I went in early and they told me to go in through the emergency room, and his resident kept calling my cell phone, checking on my progress because it was kind of a busy night that night to make sure that I was getting there, and the second that I was admitted he was right down there helping me, making sure I was comfortable because I stayed there for three or four days before the surgery. They were phenomenal.

Andrew Schorr:

What's your view of Dr. Tyler Koski and his skill as a spinal surgeon?

Stephanie:

Oh, amazing. He went over the scar that I had before, so it healed so quickly and so nicely too. He just made me feel at ease. My whole family was there the day of the surgery, and he came in and talked to everybody, and he just kept saying how great I did. And then all my follow-up visits were so fast, they were great. And, I mean, even now if I have a question I can still e-mail and they'll write me right back.

Andrew Schorr:

What difference did it make to have support from your family?

Stephanie:

Oh, there is no way that I could have done this without my parents. It got to the point where I needed help putting my shoes on, and it got to the point where, just to get up and down the stairs my mom would help me, sometimes in the shower. I mean, it was horrible to be 30 years old and not be able to lift your leg to get into the shower. Towards the end she had to help me get in and out of bed. If I didn't have my parents I really don't know how I would have done this.

Andrew Schorr:

Tell us about your life now.

Stephanie:

Oh, I feel great. I actually went to a carnival last weekend, and I went on two rides, which was a huge deal for me because for years and years I was afraid to go on rides because they all say, Oh, if you have back pain don't do it. I mean, last summer we went boating. Walking—I can go three miles, and I feel pretty good. Standing for long periods of time now is a lot easier than before, and sitting through movies was hard, and now it's great.

Before, even getting a pedicure would hurt because of the nerve damage going down my leg, I didn't even want to do that. And now there's no nerve pain. I feel both my feet. It's a huge difference.

Andrew Schorr:

Stephanie, there are probably people watching this program who are suffering with severe back pain. What would you say to them so that they make good choices and get the best care?

Stephanie:

I would say don't be scared to investigate and go find another doctor. I remember for all the years I kept going back to the first group, I almost felt bullied sometimes like they didn't believe me that I was in this amount of pain, and you kind of feel stupid. And I wanted to see my records and see what they were even saying about me. And then the second time around, I was done. I was, okay, I need to find someone who will listen to me. And it was just finding this next group, the second I walked in the office I felt completely different. I felt like I wasn't just a patient with a number. I was like they knew me as Stephanie, and it just was such a different experience.

And after that I don't know why I waited so long and went through so many years of pain for, when I could have probably found this group way before and maybe even have prevented this, I don't know. But that's definitely what I would say. Don't be afraid to leave your doctor and go find a different group that you feel good with.

Andrew Schorr:

Looking ahead, what's your plan? Get married, have a family of your own, be active?

Stephanie:

Exactly, no, you know, I can do that hopefully soon, sooner than later. And, yeah, I definitely want to have a kid, and I want to continue teaching and just continue being active. And I don't know, maybe go to Great America and go on a couple roller coasters like I used to a long time ago. That would be fun. Not be so afraid to do stuff without getting hurt.

Andrew Schorr:

And today you feel good, pretty much pain free?

Stephanie:

Most days I am. On days where if I'm in heels standing for a long time or bending with the kids a lot, but it's not where I had my surgery. It's my upper back, and that's just because I know that I hunch my shoulders a lot because of so many years of back pain, I'm still afraid something is going happen, so it's more just like muscle annoyance than anything.

Andrew Schorr:

So feeling as good as you do, this is really terrific, isn't it?

Stephanie:

Oh, yeah. The first couple days after surgery and I was feeling really good, I mean, I actually cried because I was like this feels amazing, I don't feel like I need to take medication, and I just feel like myself again.

Andrew Schorr:

Stephanie, thank you so much for sharing your story. It's inspiring to many people. We're so glad you found pain relief, and we wish you all the best for a long and active, healthy life.

Stephanie:

You thank you so much. This was fun.

Andrew Schorr:

I'm Andrew Schorr. Thank you for joining us. It's a delight when we can connect you with someone who has become a powerful patient and it's made a real difference. Remember, knowledge can be the best medicine of all.

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