PHOTOESSAY

as if ... visualizing pain

A photoessay by Deborah Padfield and Brian Hurwitz

Pain has probably driven more people into the hands of doctors than any other symptom in human history.\textsuperscript{1} Recipes to dull its effects survive from the Roman period,\textsuperscript{2} and modern-day surveys reveal how prevalent pain remains. In the general population, 15–20\% suffer from chronic pain,\textsuperscript{3,4} showing a strong age, but little social class gradient.\textsuperscript{5–7} In very many medical contexts pain is under-treated.\textsuperscript{5–7}

Depiction of physical and mental pain in Western art reflects its pervasiveness and association with moral retribution. Over more than two millennia, pictorial and sculptural depictions of screams, sighs, and tears have surmounted bodily contortions of all sorts: bending, writhing, twisting, and bleeding, often in the context of flagellation, flaying, attack, injury, damnation, and crucifixion.\textsuperscript{8} Pain as a state of ‘as if’—as if punishment, compression, burning, stabbing, bruising, and tearing—has been a dominant theme in its visualization. Yet few images of pain have been produced by sufferers themselves or have focused on the actual sensations experienced.\textsuperscript{9,10} These images begin to correct this deficit.\textsuperscript{11}

These photographs are part of a collection resulting from a collaboration between artist, Deborah Padfield, Consultant Pain Specialist Dr Charles Pither, and patients undergoing residential treatment at the St Thomas’ Hospital INPUT Pain Clinic in London. Patients were offered the opportunity to explore and co-record their experiences of pain with a professional artist and to use a selection of the images produced in subsequent medical consultations.

Through this process people in pain were encouraged to project the private sensations and experiences of pain—its associations, intensities, qualities, and significance—outwards on to the publicly accessible surfaces of canvasses and photographic plates, rather

‘I can’t feel the flesh properly, it is as if it were not alive, as if it had been turned off in some way.’
(Pain sufferer)

‘It is very deep, not just the surface. It is as if it had turned to cloth ... it is more a difference in feeling—the wrong feeling. It is about a loss, a lack.’
(Pain sufferer)

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than *inwards* towards anger, despair, and isolation. They images demonstrate the need of sufferers to feel understood by others, particularly by those treating them. They assert the desire to communicate and to gain control over the process of individual pain.

In gaining help and understanding, visualization can complement words, counting, and measurement. Visual images may also provide a more easily shared reference point from which to begin dialogue.

‘I have always found it hard to explain my pain to doctors. You have to explain it to them so that they can understand it, and it doesn’t matter how often you try to explain it to them, they still don’t understand. This is a wonderful idea.’
(Pain sufferer)

‘I had people not believing me and so I became very depressed and self-harmed.’
(Pain sufferer)

‘I see a huge rubbish tip that has mounds of rubbish on it. It feels as if there comes a point in my pain where things are under control and suddenly someone dumps a whole load of rubbish on it. It can be other people’s rubbish … it can be a change of medication.’
(Pain sufferer)
‘It is not just my body that is overwhelmed, it is my consciousness. It is as if my brain is actually being swamped, and that is the part that I resent—that I totally lose control.’
(Pain sufferer)

‘When you have pain you are stuck in a dark cocoon and you suffer in your own darkness. Pain = Evil; Evil = Darkness; Darkness = Pain.’
(Pain sufferer)

‘There is another me, all around, rather like an aura. That is the pain and is what I am continually fighting to get out of… I think possibly I am battling with my own mind.’
(Pain sufferer)
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References