

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

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Stoicism - The Art of Enduring the Unpleasant

Americans are some of the most pampered, self-indulgent people on the face of the earth. We take seriously the phrase in the Declaration of Independence which lists our inalienable rights as "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." This has evolved to foster within our collective consciousness an entitlement mentality and the belief that our lives should never have an unhappy or painful moment.

This is especially apparent when it comes to pain. I had minor surgery about 6 months ago and received a brochure on pain management from the hospital when I left. It stated that I should take pain medication before I felt pain. That is ridiculous! Our entire medical profession holds this belief which is why doctors prescribe opioids so freely and why that has led to an opioid epidemic. Doctors are just giving their patients what they want - a life free of any physical pain at any cost.

As far as I'm concerned, they have it all wrong. Haven't you ever heard the phrase "privation and suffering builds character?" There is nothing wrong with experiencing moderate amounts of pain. In fact, I believe it is beneficial for a couple of reasons. First of all, without ever experiencing pain or discomfort, pleasure cannot be appreciated. If all you ever experience are warm and fuzzy conditions, you become desensitized to pleasure and it loses its appeal. A little pain gives balance to one's life.

Secondly, pain is only bad because we have been conditioned to believe it is bad. Sometimes hurting feels good. Mystics have long denied themselves physical comfort so they can achieve spiritual awakening through asceticism. Think of Native American Sun Dancers who pierce their chests and attach lines to the skewers and pull them out as they dance around a pole. Pain can actually make you feel more alive and appreciative of life. We eat foods spiced with hot peppers for enjoyment yet no one can reasonably argue that peppers don't burn.

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I make it a point to never take any pain medication before I work out. I need to be able to feel my muscles and joints so that I do not push myself too far and incur an injury. I want to be in touch with what my body is feeling. Pain draws my attention to what is going on. If something hurts, I need to find out why and address the underlying cause, not mask the pain with medication and risk further injury.

I advocate taking the least amount of pain medication that will take the edge off your pain yet still keep you aware that there's a problem that needs your attention. I understand that some people have chronic pain issues and must take meds for it. This blog is addressed toward normal people who have no serious medical problems. I'm urging you to think twice before you take all the pain meds available to you. Don't be part of the opioid epidemic through self-indulgence. Take responsibility for your own physical well-being and that includes incorporating the ability to live with (and benefit from) minor pain in your life.