FROM SUFFERING TO STRENGTH

WHEN CHRONIC ILLNESS CHANGES EVERYTHING

A Guidebook From One Who Has Been There

BRIANNA BARRETT

SMART LIVING IN SMALL BITES

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Table of Contents

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To my son - you are the bright spot in my day. Thank you for always lending a hand and picking me up off the floor when I'm stuck (literally). I love you and all that you push me to do.

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Dear Reader

If you picked up this book, you might feel at the end of your rope. Overwhelmed by doctor's visits, endless symptoms, new diagnoses, medications, and dealing with chronic illness. Maybe you are tired of the waiting, the appointments, or, perhaps, you were recently diagnosed and don't know where to turn. I've been there. Sick and tired of being sick and tired. I didn't know where to turn either.

That's why I wrote this book, to help you on your own journey. As you read my story, I hope you find a connection to your own story, and perhaps you will find it helps you as you set forth on your path to healing.

Just as no two people are the same, no two diagnoses are either. Our stories may differ, but at the heart of chronic illness, we share commonalities. I encourage you, as you read through this book, to take time to reflect and utilize the spaces provided to start your own healing journey.

I hope this book helps you, and please know, friend, that you are never alone.

Praying for you,

Brianna

"My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever."

– Psalm 73:26 NLT

My Story

I didn't hear the heavy footsteps or the keys jingling as he unlocked the door. I didn't hear his briefcase hit the ground as he came running, because I was lying on the floor. I must have blacked out again. I was just three months pregnant, but it seemed something terrible was wrong. It wasn't the first time my husband came home to find me this way. I thought these "spells" were over. It had been a while since I had one. They started back in college, but they came and went.

Thankfully, my husband was a firefighter EMT and he was good under pressure. I immediately became his patient, which meant a sternum rub to get me awake. He methodically went through the things he could, checking my blood sugar and my blood pressure. Nothing seemed to explain why I was lying on the floor.

We went to visit the doctor... again. The obstetrician didn't have a clue what was going on. My labs and ultrasound looked fine. Nothing jumped out at him. I wasn't considered a high-risk pregnancy—I was only 23 years old and didn't have any known health concerns. It just didn't make sense. We left the doctor's office and were no closer to figuring out what was wrong.

After a meeting of the minds at the OBGYN clinic, they decided I should see a specialist. The cardiologist ran some tests and had me wear a monitor for a couple of weeks. The whole experience was terrifying, but I wasn't really worried about myself so much as I was about my baby.

My parents tried to shed light on the situation, too, helping me to complete a medical history. I grew up with a lot of unexplained hurts, unexplained rashes, and pain. Doctors wrote me off, telling my parents I was experiencing growing pains. In high school, my bowels had shut down and we had to deal with that, though the doctors could never really explain it. Shortly after, I was in pain again. The doctors were pressing me to take a pregnancy test and STD panel, but as they were arguing with me (I knew it wasn't either), my appendix ruptured. But there was no passing out back then, and none of these episodes seemed to directly explain my current issue. Could it be that the pains of my youth simply morphed into these blackout sessions?

The cardiologist came back to us with a grim face. He wanted to perform heart surgery on me while our son was in utero to "fix" the blackouts. I didn't really understand all the things he said because I was just overwhelmed. A heart surgery that could jeopardize our child wasn't an option. I'd do whatever it took to protect him.

A few months later, the blackout sessions continued, but we were assured that everything was fine. As August approached, the stress remained high. We still had a lot to prepare for the baby, and perhaps all new moms say that because nothing truly prepares you for your new reality.

On August 7th at 2 a.m., my husband walked through the door after returning home from a work trip. My mom was sitting next to me on the couch because I had started experiencing high blood pressure. Later that day, I began to see stars—literally. My blood pressure soared even higher, which resulted in me being placed on an uncomfortable gurney in the labor and delivery unit. I was kept overnight in an effort

to bring my blood pressure down, and they instructed me to try to sleep. (Do they understand how impossible that feels with the frequent checks and the constant beeping of monitors throughout the night?)

I lay on that gurney feeling alone, scared, and not sure of where to turn. The nurses talked about me in hushed voices when they came in. I was to get some rest because tomorrow they would decide if our baby was coming. As exciting as meeting your new baby is, I was terrified because I was only 35 weeks pregnant.

During those few hours that I laid there, I talked to God—begged and pleaded with Him. I just wanted my baby to be healthy.

The sun always rises, and the next morning I was greeted with the on-call doctor's grim face. My blood pressure hadn't decreased like they thought it should, which meant we were having a baby. He did a quick ultrasound and that's when his face changed again. He told the nurse we were having the baby now—to get an OR prepped immediately. I'll save you the details, but my amniotic fluid had been leaking and my baby was breech. We were about to have a C-section.

Our baby boy was born, all 7lbs and 11oz of him. The room grew silent. My husband peeked over the sheet to make sure everything was okay. Our son wasn't crying. He was puppy panting, trying to get his breath. The doctor whisked him out of the room after a very quick picture and sent him to the NICU, "just for observation." My husband and I were left wondering what was going on. We only started getting information beyond "he was in for observation" after

he coded while my husband was holding him for the first time.

We spent the next two weeks pacing the floors of the hospital. I pleaded and begged God to make this baby better. The days were long and the nights even longer. I'd always wanted to be a mother, and I was afraid I was about to lose my opportunity. Finally, I was discharged from the hospital, but my son had to stay.

My heart was torn in half. I didn't want to be home; I wanted my baby. Things weren't going the way I thought. At night, I couldn't sleep. Instead, I stared at the ceiling, worrying. I spent every day beside his bed, only pulled away from time to time by my family who insisted I take care of myself, too. I didn't care if I ate or slept (I didn't do much of either in those first few weeks). I stopped taking care of myself.

When you're walking those lonely halls, you don't realize everything that's going on around you. The people you walk by each day, the smells and the sounds. You feel all alone in your struggles. No one knew how I felt, the emotions, the thoughts racing through my head—not even my husband. The world kept moving on, yet time seemed suspended as I sat upon a hard plastic chair beside my son's bed, wrapped in a cloak of anxiety and loneliness. I was merely hanging on by a thread.

Our son eventually came home, but we spent most of our days at some sort of appointment caring for this precious child. He had health concerns that we were further investigating. At least once a week, I packed a bag for a day-long trip to the hospital. Over the first few months, I was too elated that my baby boy had survived to notice how tired I was. I failed to notice that I was in more pain than I could ever remember.

This continued for years before I realized I wasn't feeling well. I struggled to get out of bed; I struggled to open jars and stand for long periods. I didn't have time to not feel well. I had a baby to care for (who didn't sleep). My days and nights ran together, and dark rings developed under my eyes. I went to my follow-up appointments, and the doctors pushed me to have more tests run. They wanted to know what caused the blackout sessions that persisted.

I didn't have time to go to more appointments, coordinate care for my son, and spend half a day with someone poking and prodding me. I was stressed with work, finances, stress in my marriage, and just... life. I didn't have time to be sick. I continued pushing through the days, doing enough to survive. The pain started and my joints began to swell, but I just ignored it. I got weaker each month as our son grew bigger, and I struggled more and more to carry him.

My days were spent just getting by. I wasn't living, but surviving. Then the weight loss happened. We aren't talking five pounds, but more like all of my baby weight and then twenty more. It felt like it happened within a couple of months, but maybe it was slightly longer (my brain is foggy most days). My clothes started to hang on me. I looked sick—I felt sick. But, I didn't know where to turn, much less have the mental or physical energy to pursue testing.

Though those long nights with a newborn were dark and seemingly void of life, with me sitting half-slumped in the rocker, I still found myself marveling over my precious boy cooing and sleeping. In those moments, I knew God existed. I mean, who else could create such perfection?

On the nights when I actually got to sleep in my bed, I cried silently, worrying about what was yet to come and crying because I wanted my own mama and daddy to come and rescue me and make it all better. I longed for healing and cried that this wasn't my given lot.

Three years passed by; three years of letting my symptoms progress. And then, my grandmother died unexpectedly. This was a wake-up call to me because she was a thriving woman still in her prime. Within a week of her death, I scheduled an appointment with every doctor that I had been putting off. I had witnessed people struggle in life, like my grandfather whose ailments kept him confined to a lift chair ever since I could remember. I did not want this for my life and decided to fight for my health. Over the course of weeks and months, after multiple tests and procedures, I had an answer. I finally had a diagnosis: rheumatoid arthritis and vasovagal syncope. (Further diagnoses were added over the next several years.)

My initial reaction was just give me a pill and I'll be on my way. I didn't realize what chronic illness meant. I didn't realize this would be my life going forward. I was naive and young, still not completely believing the diagnosis.

But I decided it was time to take over my health, and I was willing to do whatever it took. Drink water, eat a Mediterranean diet, exercise, take medicine, and take more to offset the medicines I just swallowed... I was frustrated and overwhelmed with emotions that I couldn't put a finger on. Maybe it was just chaotic notions that I was losing control of my own body... Each time I sat in those plastic chairs, I thought, "Maybe this once I will find healing." It felt like a scavenger hunt more than a medical journey. At times, it felt like doctors didn't know what to say, so they grasped for straws giving theories and trials. Other times, their confidence reeked from them because

they seemed to think they were God. Those were the ones that didn't make it far with me. I kindly reminded those that they were practicing medicine. It's not been an easy fix; different seasons have brought new diagnoses, surgeries, and problems.

The names and locations of the hospitals may have changed over the last 16 years, but the loneliness, the worry, the smells, and sounds haven't. The sparsely decorated walls with pictures that are supposed to be calming and provide peace can often feel depressing. But, over time, these walls have started to feel second nature to me, like a second home. The uncomfortable plastic chairs in the waiting area have become a place to find rest, perspective, and healing. A place for me to take in the sights and the people, and a place for me to speak with God.

And as I continue to seek rest and healing, through prayer and medical care, I find the strength to put one foot in front of the other—so that I can keep holding on to the hand of my precious boy.

"Your path is more difficult because your calling is higher."

- Unknown

Your Story

While some journeys may exhibit similarities, each is inherently unique to the traveler. I encourage you to take some time to write about your unique journey. Your story's important. You can write it for your eyes only, or share it when you feel ready. Finding your voice in the pain is an important step toward healing and hope.

The rest of the author's story has been intentionally removed. To read more, the entire book is available on Amazon.

"Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the little voice at the end of the day that says I'll try again tomorrow."

- Mary Anne Radmacher

Problems to Face

No one can truly understand what you face when you endure a chronic illness. There is empathy and compassion, and people try (especially those close to you), but until they've walked in your shoes they can't fully understand the challenges you encounter each day.

Even though you and I both share the journey of chronic illness, we will have similarities and differences in our stories, because no two chronic illnesses are the same, just as no two people are the same. However, I am willing to guess that we may have common pain points, and I'm hoping to address some of those here. If nothing else, I hope that by sharing my experiences you will know that you are not alone in yours.

I'd also like to encourage you by sharing this: as I took time to write out five major problems I've had to face, I was reminded of how much healing has happened in my life. Even though it's not complete yet, I have been able to make progress... and progress should never be discounted!

As you read each of my problems in this section, you will have the chance to record any thoughts or feelings they stir up in the lines that follow. I encourage you to allow yourself to be vulnerable and honest. You don't have to share any of this with anyone else, unless you want to. This is simply an opportunity to begin your own journey of healing.

"Do not despise these small beginnings, for the LORD rejoices to see the work begin..." (Zechariah 4:10, NLT).

Fear

I'm embarrassed to say this because, as a Christian woman, I shouldn't have these thoughts... but I struggle with fear.

I fear this disease is getting worse.
I fear getting another infection, and maybe the next one won't heal like the last one.
I fear the new medicines and their unknown side effects.
I fear this disease will finally end me.
I fear the next thing.
I fear being left.

I carry a lot of fear of the unknown. I struggle with the truth versus the lies in my head some days. I've sat and wondered if my husband would leave me. I mean, he didn't exactly sign up for this. Most days, it can be a lot. The last time I went to the doctor, they shared that one more area of my body was being attacked by this disease. My husband commented, "Of course. It's just one more thing." I know his comment wasn't directed at me, but it pierced my heart that day. The news of further progression sent my mind reeling with the possibilities and the what ifs, and then his comment made me start thinking he was tired of dealing with this—tired of dealing with me.

Keep in mind, he never said any of that. But fear can quickly leave a door open for lies to creep into my mind, and if I'm not on guard, I internalize them without realizing it. When I am physically struggling, it's easy to start believing the lies.

What do you fear today? What lies creep into your mind when you are most vulnerable?

We hope you enjoyed this sample. If you're interested in reading more of this book or seeing other books in the series, click on Amazon to get your copy today.

Can you live abundantly with chronic illness?

Are you exhausted from letting chronic illness dictate the rhythm of your life?

Your days revolve around doctor appointments, endless symptoms, new diagnoses, and medications—the relentless realities of living in a body that doesn't always cooperate.

In *When Chronic Illness Changes Everything*, Brianna Barrett shares her years-long search for answers to unexplained pain and blackouts. Even after receiving a diagnosis, she faced new challenges: uncertainty about the future, profound loneliness, and dismissal from the very people meant to help.

But years spent in waiting rooms also taught Brianna something unexpected: how to cultivate meaningful connections, discover joy in small moments, and build a vibrant life even on the days her body felt anything but strong.

No two chronic illnesses look exactly alike, but the grief, frustration, and isolation often do. Through Brianna's story, you'll discover how to move beyond merely managing symptoms and begin reclaiming the life that's still yours to live.

Inside, you'll:

- Read her story—a story that may feel familiar
- Discover the challenges she faced and the practical steps she took
- Find courage through honesty, faith, and hope
- Reflect on your own journey through guided prompts
- Be reminded that you are not walking this path alone

Chronic illness may place limits on your life, but it doesn't have to define it.

More than a book, it's a guide

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