**PETER'S STORY**

**A new career as a massage therapist.**

*Peter used his experience with RSI to find what he really wanted out of life. He runs a successful business from home and is doing something that he really loves – helping people. He has had RSI for 13 years but has found ways of making his business and life satisfying.*

I got RSI around September 1989 when I was working as a source document operator, a job that involved preparing documents to be put onto microfiche film. A couple of months after I started the company won a contract to transfer documents from a large government department onto microfiche. The majority of the documents had staples that would damage the lens if left in, so a co-worker and myself spent an entire day picking up documents and extracting staples from them.

I can’t remember if it was that afternoon or the following day that the pain first occurred but I remember how intense it was. It was like someone was holding a blow-torch to my arm. The pain was so bad that I couldn’t work. The company I worked for didn’t have any other positions for me and I ended up not working at all for three and a half months.

Before my injury I had detailed planes and cars on weekends. Cars had always been a great passion of mine so working with them was a source of pleasure and extra income. I would pick up a car on a Friday afternoon and spend the weekend cleaning and polishing it, often preparing it for a car show. I always took a great deal of pride in every car and I never did a quick job. It was the same with planes, I would make sure that they were in the best possible condition. Suddenly I couldn’t detail any more and I felt it wouldn’t have been worse if they had cut my arm off.

My wife was very understanding as she had experienced RSI herself so she could empathise with me. But I didn’t speak to anyone else about it. There was such a stigma attached to RSI and so much disbelief surrounding it that I just didn’t talk about my experience. I became very depressed about what the future held and also angry that I had been placed in that situation.

There were so many other little things I couldn’t do, like start the lawn mower or write a letter. I didn’t know what was going to happen. I began having physiotherapy and tried to rest but my anger and depression continued. I didn’t know how I was going to earn an income again or even if I’d be able to work again.

I followed a compensation case for a while but it never seemed to be going anywhere. The company I had worked for would take six weeks to send a requested document to the insurers and then it would be the wrong one. Everyone told me that I should stick with it because I had a really good case. I didn’t want to have my life under a microscope, I’d had enough.

Through this time I often questioned why it was happening to me and there didn’t seem to be any answers. Then I remembered something I’d heard once. I was doing a sky-diving course and when the instructor asked a man why he wanted to jump out of an aeroplane, the man replied that he didn’t want to be 90 years old and look up to the sky one day and wish that he’d done it. I realised that there were two ways to deal with my RSI: see it as a death sentence; or accept that I had RSI and not let it rule my life. I knew then that I didn’t want to have any regrets and I didn’t want to surrender to my RSI.

How I view my RSI now is very different than it was in the beginning. I can see that it was a big wake-up call and that it led me to finding out what I really wanted to do with my life. I don’t believe in coincidence, I believe that I was led to my talent – massage and helping people with this. For the past 10 years I have run my own massage business from home, and worked as a volunteer masseur for various organisations.

I came across massage when I was being treated for a problem with my leg. At the time I had to use a walking stick but after only two sessions with a particular masseur, I could walk without it. This sparked my interest in massage, and when I found myself without much direction and unable to work I decided to take one of the courses that he ran. I enjoyed it so much that I went on to get Diplomas in Swedish and Remedial Massage.

It took me until I was nearly 40 to discover that massage was what I wanted to do with my life. I now get so much satisfaction and happiness from what I do. The human body is such a wonderful creation and has so much potential, just like the human spirit. Massage for me is like showing people the potential that they have. I can’t fix or cure anything in particular but I can show people their potential by helping them gain more mobility or flexibility or even just helping someone have a restful night’s sleep.

I also work with cancer patients and homeless youth. I found that just massaging someone’s hands or scalp really helps those who are feeling lonely or depressed. It’s because human contact can put you back in touch with the world and yourself.

I have to be careful how much massage I do. If I try to cram too many people into one day, my arms get sore and that’s not fair to myself or my clients if I can’t massage them properly. So I limit myself to four massages a day but they generally go for about an hour and a half and I try to have an hour break between each one.

Working for myself means that I can decide when I work and how much I do in one day. I may get less money this way but it’s about figuring out what is most important in life. If I don’t push myself too hard and continue to look after my body through diet and exercise I don’t see why I can’t still be massaging when I’m 80.

I treat a lot of people with RSI and I can really empathise with how they are feeling. I have also discovered that they all have similar problems – high levels of stress, low oxygen levels, high levels of acid in their systems and poor lymphatic drainage. This has caused me to reason that you have to treat these things before you can effectively deal with the RSI itself. These things have all contributed to the onset of RSI and need to be changed before you can heal.

This can be the hardest part - looking at your life and finding ways to change so you don’t have that level of stress or the other associated problems. The biggest thing I learnt was that I had to change things for myself. I had felt very alienated and cut off from others because of the stigma attached to RSI. But I think many people have low emotional and physical reserves for themselves these days, so there can be little left for anyone else. To me this means that if people seem cruel or unhelpful they don’t necessarily mean it, but it can exacerbate that feeling of alienation. This showed me that I had to help myself because no one else was going to do it for me.

There is a lot of destructive anger tied up with RSI that can lead to having a victim mentality. Allowing this anger to ferment has a very corrupting influence on the body. A friend said to me once that he had seen patients who didn’t want to get better because then they would have to go back to the situation they were in before. I see now that the answer lies in changing that original situation. If you are awake to your RSI it can be of tremendous benefit to you. You can learn from it and change the things that you don’t like in your life and in the process find happiness and reveal who you really are.

A famous sculptor was once asked how he could turn a piece of rock into a beautiful statue. He replied that the figure was already there, all he had to do was chip away the outside to reveal it. RSI can have a similar effect on people, by becoming more aware of ourselves we can chip away all those outside bits to find who we are meant to be. Through experiencing and understanding pain we can become better people – more caring, empathetic and loving.

I don’t feel angry or depressed at my RSI any more. I feel that I have become the person I was meant to be and that my RSI lead me to it. I can now focus on the positive things in life, like my wife and daughter. I wake up each morning and thank God that he has given me another day to live and this helps me see that I can manage my condition and view my future very positively.

The advice I would most like to offer people with RSI is that you can’t change yesterday, so don’t dwell on it and don’t sweat on tomorrow; just live so that you have as few regrets as possible. And also remember that it’s not necessarily easy. Sometimes you have to try lots of things until you find what’s easiest and best for you. You just have to do it for yourself.