



Online article and related content
current as of May 12, 2010.

The Language of Pain: Finding Words, Compassion, and Relief

Preeti N. Malani

JAMA. 2010;303(18):1866 (doi:10.1001/jama.2010.600)

<http://jama.ama-assn.org/cgi/content/full/303/18/1866>

Correction

[Contact me if this article is corrected.](#)

Citations

[Contact me when this article is cited.](#)

Topic collections

Pain

[Contact me when new articles are published in these topic areas.](#)

Subscribe

<http://jama.com/subscribe>

Email Alerts

<http://jamaarchives.com/alerts>

Permissions

permissions@ama-assn.org
<http://pubs.ama-assn.org/misc/permissions.dtl>

Reprints/E-prints

reprints@ama-assn.org

THE LANGUAGE OF PAIN: FINDING WORDS, COMPASSION, AND RELIEF

By David Biro
 256 pp, \$24.95
 New York, NY, WW Norton & Company Inc, 2010
 ISBN-13: 978-0-3930-7063-7

ALTHOUGH LANGUAGE CAN CAPTURE A WIDE RANGE OF HUMAN experiences, it simply fails when it comes to pain. This shrewd observation forms the basis for David Biro's new book, *The Language of Pain: Finding Words, Compassion, and Relief*. Pain is not only an academic interest to Biro but a personal journey. After finishing his medical residency, Biro was diagnosed with a rare blood disorder and underwent bone marrow transplantation for treatment (an experience detailed in his earlier work, *One Hundred Days: My Unexpected Journey From Doctor to Patient*). In addition to his medical training, Biro holds a PhD in English literature. Despite considerable command of language, he experienced what other patients experience—an inability to express pain in words. Biro writes that pain “literally strangled my vocal cords.” He cites Edvard Munch's painting, *The Scream*, when describing his agony: “Silenced, I felt just like Munch's sufferer: wanting to scream as loudly as I could but unable to make a sound.”

Given his experiences as well as those of others, Biro set out to explore the reasons for pain's inexpressibility and to identify ways to overcome them. *The Language of Pain* is divided into 2 sections, “The Crisis” (the first 4 chapters), and “The Solution” (the final 5). In the first section, the private and public aspects of pain are noted, along with its wide-ranging effects on the individual. Repeatedly, Biro explains to readers why pain is isolating and all-encompassing as well as the reasons that pain is impossible to share: “Pain erects a wall between us and the outside world. At the same time, it prevents us from breaching that wall by communicating the experience to others.” He notes that the resulting isolation and solitude add to an individual's anguish in the face of pain.

In the second section, Biro illustrates the usefulness of metaphor as a potential solution to “the crisis”—a means to “replace what is inside and inaccessible with what is outside and directly perceptible.” He explains that “By talking about what we don't understand in terms of what we do understand, metaphor gives us words and objects where there were none, clarity where there was murkiness, and the potential to share where there was loneliness.” Herein lies the true genius of *The Language of Pain*. It systematically builds the case for metaphor using literature, art, and patient vignettes as bricks and mortar. In

doing so, the author manages to articulate a more tangible understanding of pain.

Each thoughtfully selected example helps provide the language that Biro seeks. He takes readers to Jack London's Yukon Territory and Hemingway's Kilimanjaro. He carefully examines the works of writers such as Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Susan Sontag and includes artwork to provide a visual depiction of pain. The “War-time” chapter uses wartime metaphors to demonstrate the connection between injury and pain, reminding readers that one is not essential to the other. The pages go on to articulate the “stabbing” pain of appendicitis and the “pounding” of migraine headaches, along with other individual components, Biro creates a larger portrait of pain, deftly addressing the physical as well as psychological aspects of the human experience of pain.

Although several books provide first-person accounts of illness and pain, Biro's use in *The Language of Pain* of many different experiences (fictional and real) to construct a broader commentary is an important and unique contribution. He moves beyond simply recounting events and instead actually transforms how the reader thinks about pain. In a rather remarkable way, he even demands better accountability from clinicians in terms of how pain is managed.

Despite the heaviness of the subject, *The Language of Pain* addresses the complexity of pain in a surprisingly accessible manner. Biro's writing is nuanced and detailed, and although some of the content is redundant, readers will have no difficulty remaining engaged. Undertreated and underrecognized, pain remains an Achilles' heel in modern medicine. With a lack of numbers to quantify discomfort or consistent signs and symptoms, pain does not easily fit into a traditional diagnostic paradigm. This elusiveness adds to the challenge of treatment. Although Biro offers no magic bullet, his insight does improve understanding of what pain does to patients. Thus, he is successful in his charge of finding relief through words. He closes by reminding readers that language can alleviate pain, offer compassion, and improve understanding: “As long as the conversation lasts, we are not alone.”

Preeti N. Malani, MD, MSJ
 University of Michigan Health System
 Veterans Affairs Healthcare System Ann Arbor
 Ann Arbor, Michigan
 pmalani@umich.edu

Financial Disclosures: None reported.

Book and Media Reviews Section Editor: John L. Zeller, MD, PhD, Contributing Editor.