

## Group Reading Guide

# *The Painful Truth:*

*What Chronic Pain Is Really Like  
and Why It Matters to Each of Us*

by Lynn R. Webster, M.D.

## Book Overview

Chronic pain affects 1 in 3 Americans and exerts more than a \$600-billion drain on the economy annually. It is the largest invisible epidemic in the land. Having treated thousands of patients with chronic pain—often when they were at their most vulnerable—Lynn R. Webster, M.D., continues to believe there is hope. Ultimately, a cure for pain will require more research, better therapies, and improved policies. But healing can begin today with a broad-based approach to treatment, including compassionate support from those closest to the ones who are hurting.

*The Painful Truth* is an intimate collection of stories about people living with disabling pain, their attempts to heal, and the challenges that we collectively face in helping them live meaningful lives. As a physician who has treated people with chronic pain for more than thirty years, Dr. Webster reveals the difficulties that patients face in dealing with chronic pain in a society that is often shamefully prejudiced against those who are most in need of our empathy. He shares how such biases also affect medical professionals who treat patients with chronic pain.

In Part 1 of the book, Dr. Webster introduces nine former patients of his, illustrating their unique situations as their lives were suddenly and dramatically torn apart by chronic pain. These personal stories are raw and truthful, revealing the humanity of an often-overlooked part of our society. Each story describes a person's journey toward healing in the face of misunderstanding and societal barriers.

Part 2 of *The Painful Truth* helps readers understand the uncomfortable realities faced by people in pain. Due to controversies over opioid prescriptions, they are often unable to get the treatment they need. Dr. Webster initiates a bold series of calls to action about how we all can contribute to a cultural transformation that will change attitudes and behaviors toward people in pain. The goal is to ensure that treatment of chronic pain is established as a human right.

## Discussion Questions

1. Do you have chronic pain? If so, describe it and tell about its effects upon your life. (If you don't have chronic pain, then talk instead about a loved one who is dealing with pain and what the pain has done to your relationship.)
2. Describe the differences between healing and curing, as defined in Chapter 1 of *The Painful Truth*. What is your opinion of the book's description of healing as a possibility for nearly everyone who has pain?
3. What factors might prevent healing from pain? What factors might promote it?
4. What do you think is the most important asset or trait that a doctor can have in responding to a person with chronic pain?
5. What are the factors in Carolyn Tuft's life that enable her to get up every day and face her pain all over again (Chapter 2)?
6. Compare the genetic and environmental factors of Rachel Hutchins (Chapter 3) and Ali Goldsmith (Chapter 9) that influenced the development of an opioid use disorder in Rachel but not in Ali. Also, what advantages did Ali have that helped her manage her pain better than Rachel?
7. If you were Jason Bing's spouse, how would you have responded to his pain problem (Chapter 4)?
8. What is the "culture" of your family and circle of friends in regard to dealing with pain? Is it a suck-it-up model, or do people offer acceptance?
9. Not only do many returning veterans face post-traumatic stress disorder due to their war experiences, but also they may have pain problems from injuries. What are some variables that can limit their ability to get treatment?
10. How does opioid addiction differ from tolerance to opioids, as explained in Chapter 5?
11. What factors influence whether a person may develop an opioid addiction? What can help a person wean off opioids if he or she is addicted?
12. How did love and unconditional acceptance change the lives of Marsha and John Kay (Chapter 6)?
13. What role, if any, does spirituality play in how you cope with adversity (Chapter 7)?
14. If you had a friend like Michael Petersen (Chapter 8) who was depressed and threatened suicide because of pain, what would you do about it?

15. How can a caregiver for someone in pain find the line between helping enough and helping too much?
16. What kinds of self-care and self-advocacy should people in pain try to take responsibility for, if they are able (Chapter 9)?
17. What is the “chilling effect,” as illustrated in Chapter 10? How have you experienced or observed the chilling effect when it comes to the availability of pain treatment?
18. How do you reconcile the need for safety oversight by agencies such as the DEA with a patient’s right to get the therapy he or she needs?
19. What do you think it will take to achieve a society-wide determination to support people with pain and to cure pain once and for all?
20. What can you do, as an individual, to make a difference?
21. How has *The Painful Truth* changed your views on pain, opioid addiction, or the future of pain treatment?
22. What action step has it motivated you to take today?

## **About the Author**

Lynn R. Webster, M.D., is vice president of scientific affairs for PRA Health Sciences, a leading international medical research organization. He was formerly the founder of Lifetree Clinic and Lifetree Clinical Research, both in Salt Lake City, Utah, and was president of the American Academy of Pain Medicine in 2013–14.

After receiving his doctor of medicine degree from the University of Nebraska in 1976, Webster undertook an internship, fellowship, and residency at the University of Utah. He is board certified in anesthesiology, pain medicine, and addiction medicine. He practiced anesthesiology at Salt Lake City’s Holy Cross Hospital, and then pain medicine at Lifetree Clinic, for many years before focusing on medical research and public advocacy for people with pain.

Dr. Webster lives with his wife, Holly, in Salt Lake City. They have two grown children.

*For more resources, go to:*

- [LynnWebsterMD.com](http://LynnWebsterMD.com)
- [ThePainfulTruthBook.com](http://ThePainfulTruthBook.com)
- [ThePainfulTruthDocumentary.com](http://ThePainfulTruthDocumentary.com)