

Former Chicago police officer, author, and mother of two, Doris Razo explains how she found inner peace through her past and present experiences battling scleroderma.

The Courage to Fight, The Will to Write



“It was not something I wanted to hear,” explains Doris Razo, 49, “this ‘standby-and-wait’ sort of attitude towards my scleroderma. These were my doctors, my trusted experts, who were giving up on me and assigning victory to the disease. I still had so much ‘fight’ left in me. I simply couldn’t let their discouraging outlook become my own.”

Diagnosed with scleroderma in April of 1998 at 38 years of age, Doris soon came to learn her battle against scleroderma was two-fold: to fight the disease, and to defend her opinions amidst opposing medical advisors. One would think, as a single mother of two young girls, (Megan and Natalie), Doris would resign herself to following a routine, prescribed method of action. Yet Doris was not the kind of woman to be seduced by the common road of least resistance. Rather, her life was a testament to the exact opposite, having pledged to face the unexpected and the dangerous by joining the Chicago police force at 49 years of age. Her bravery would be tested long after her departure from the force, as her complications from scleroderma warranted the consideration of a stem cell transplant procedure. Yet with a warrior’s composure and resilience, Doris prevailed and discovered a sense of peace within her struggles. Doris’ candid memoir titled, *Chasing the Cure*, reveals

that true power is found not in the absence of discomfort but in the presence of it; one must create a sense of balance amidst the chaos.

A Fighting Force

From a very young age, Doris had always been assigned by her parents to “watch over” her older siblings, and to make sure that everyone was safe. Doris demonstrated a sense of care and responsibility not only for herself but for those she loved. After high school, Doris began searching for a fulfilling career. She began by becoming a legal secretary for a top Chicago-based firm during the daytime and taking college courses at night. Doris found she had an aptitude for secretarial work, and decided to stay in the field of law. By 1985, Doris had married and given birth to her first daughter, Natalie. Her second child, Megan, came two years later. Although all seemed to be going well, in 1988, Doris and her husband filed for divorce. Despite the upcoming challenge of acting as a single mother, Doris resigned never to let such anxieties keep her from being a caring provider for her two young children.

It wasn’t until the spring of 1995 that Doris decided to end her 17-year tenure as a legal secretary to embark on a new career as a police officer by at-

Write to Your Heart's Content

Writing can be a great way to explore your thoughts and feelings when managing your symptoms and experiences with scleroderma. Just ask renowned psychologist and University of Texas professor, Dr. James W. Pennebaker, about his findings regarding the benefits of writing as a means of mental and emotional healing.



“Writing about emotional upheavals in our lives can offer a means of improving our physical and mental health,” says Pennebaker, author of the book, *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma and Emotional Upheaval* (2004). Pennebaker’s studies on therapeutic writing have been published in such scholarly journals as the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* and *Psychological Science*. “Although the scientific research surrounding the value of expressive writing is still ongoing, there are some approaches to writing that have been discovered to be helpful to individuals looking for mental and emotional healing.”

Pennebaker recommends the following guidelines for individuals seeking to begin a healing writing regimen of their own:

- Find a time and place where you will not be disturbed. Often, these times are most convenient when scheduled at the end of your workday or before you go to bed.
- Make a promise to yourself to write for a minimum of 15 minutes each day for at least three or four consecutive days.
- Once you begin your writing session, write continuously. Do not worry about spelling or grammar. If you run out of things to write about, repeat what you have already written. Topics to consider might revolve around thoughts, dreams, emotions, and/or events. Remember, your words are your own.
- You can write longhand or type on a computer. If you have difficulty writing or typing, you can always talk into a tape recorder.
- Your accumulated writings are your own, and you can decide to keep or abandon them. Always encourage yourself to be free and uninhibited when writing.

A copy of Pennebaker’s book, *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma and Emotional Upheaval*, can be found at www.newharbinger.com.

tending the police academy. “I wasn’t intimidated by the possibility of danger,” noted Doris, “I felt proud knowing my community depended on me for their protection and safety.” Doris felt her five-month training helped her to develop the skills necessary to avoid harmful consequences on the job. Her training did not prepare her, however, for the unexpected symptoms she would soon find plaguing her hands and face.

During the winter of 1997, nearly 1½ years after becoming a member of the force, Doris began to notice her fingers turning white and feeling numb to the touch. She assumed arthritis and sensitivity to the cold given the frigid temperatures of the season. Yet when the spring arrived, her symptoms did not disappear as expected. Instead, her complications continued extending to her feet, hands, arms, and legs. Extreme swelling and burning sensations followed. Doris found herself struggling to get up each morning to carry out her duties not only as a police officer, but also as a mother.

Doris’ younger daughter, Megan, recalls her observations of her mother prior to her diagnosis, saying “I just thought she was tired all the time, and would bounce back if she just took some sort of medication. I started to believe it was something more serious when she couldn’t go to work anymore.” By mid-April of 1998, Doris found her way to a rheumatologist for a consultation. After a few tests, Doris received her diagnosis of systemic scleroderma.

Battling the Unexpected

“The rheumatologist printed out a couple of sheets of paper for me explaining the basics of the disease,” recalled Doris. “I remember leaving the office clutching onto those papers, hoping that they would provide me with answers about my future, when I knew they couldn’t.” Yet facing the facts was not something Doris was truly prepared to do. Admitting to herself that she had an autoimmune disease became the first battle she would have to overcome. “My mom first said the word ‘scleroderma’ when I was 10 years old. She simply mentioned it, without sitting us down to give us a straight, serious talk about the disease,” recalled Megan.

Doris’ older sister, Connie, was informed of her sister’s diagnosis in just as casual a manner. “Doris never made scleroderma seem as serious as it was. After years of looking out for her family, for her community, I don’t think she wanted anyone to know that she was now vulnerable to a debilitating disease.” Connie took the time to research more information about scleroderma online, and her results proved to be rather alarming. “I was literally

shocked when I learned more about the seriousness of the disease. I realized I needed to help Doris come to terms with her diagnosis, to realize it wasn’t some sort of mistake or miscalculation that would resolve itself in time.” The realities of Doris’ diagnosis would soon become so overwhelming to her that she would no longer be able to ignore their existence as real.



Doris, center, with her two daughters, Natalie and Megan

Enlisting the help of her sister, Connie, Doris set out to tackle the newfound interloper that had claimed so much of her health. Within 5–7 months of her diagnosis, Doris’ movement and energy was already beginning to deteriorate at a rapid pace. Her weight dropped significantly, her flexibility became extremely limited and fatigue overwhelmed her. As an officer, Doris struggled to maintain her active duty—bringing her to the brink of exhaustion. By August of 1998, Doris could no longer stand the physical demands of her job, and decided to go on disability. Doris knew if she wanted to survive, she needed to begin by focusing all her energies on protecting her own health and overall well-being.

Doris first began by reaching out to her local scleroderma chapter and attended support group meetings whenever possible. It was also during this time Doris began considering aggressive treatments, and looking for doctors who would support her in her mission. Yet it seemed to Doris that few doctors were as motivated as she was to battle the disease. Her visits to non-traditional doctors only resulted in unfulfilled promises that she would be “running by the springtime.” Doris no longer wished for false promises of problem-free health, but, instead for chances at a stable condition.

Desperate for an opportunity to slow the progression of her scleroderma, Doris and Connie began looking at the viability of a stem-cell transplant procedure in 1999. Although classified as “experimental,” such stem-cell transplants offered Doris a reason to hope, and a chance at a better life. In January of 2000, Doris’ stem cell transplant application was accepted, and she soon traveled with her friend Patty to Seattle, Washington to undergo the transplant operation. Daughters Megan and Natalie anxiously stayed behind to finish out the school year in Chicago. Although arduous at times, the procedure was successful. Doris resigned herself to a local residence for three months and required help from her friend Patty, and other family members during her recuperation. During the final half of her recovery, Megan and Natalie flew out to Seattle to visit and help their mother. “I never knew how strong my mother had been all this time, until I saw her pull herself back from her operation. It was a humbling experience.” The transplant provided Doris with an opportunity to stabilize her condition.

Gaining Composure Through Composition

Returning from her successful transplant in Seattle, Doris considered the idea of cataloging her experiences with scleroderma in the form of a memoir. At first, Doris considered the idea too volatile. “I had come so far in battling my disease, I wasn’t sure revisiting the pains of the past would be of benefit to me.” In a year’s passing, however, Doris still couldn’t shake the thought of transcribing all her experiences with the disease. Finally, in 2004, Doris sat down to write her story, confident in the belief that her words might not only bring some fulfillment to her, but also to others struggling with an autoimmune disease who might someday read her book. By 2008, she had completed her 100-page story*, detailing every battle waged and victory won against scleroderma. More importantly, she had created a candid journal expressing her deepest reservations about the disease for her daughters to read. “For the first time, I felt like I was able to understand her not only as my mom, but as a woman,” noted Megan. “This book was a tremendous outlet for her to say everything she never revealed to [my sister and me] at the time.” Doris’ sister, Connie, agreed adding, “In some ways, her book helped her to be at peace with herself, and the disease.”

Indeed, though Doris has since found a sense of composure and calm, her physical limitations have nevertheless remained a formidable obstacle to her everyday living. “There are still things I cannot do, and I’ve accepted that,” acknowledges Doris, “I’ve learned to improvise and adapt, but mostly I’ve learned to preserve a positive state of mind.” Taking one day at a time, Doris maintains a balanced outlook and expectations of herself and others. Yet no matter what humble opinions Doris keeps of herself, others see a more sensational person. “I still see her struggle everyday,” says Megan, “It’s never completely over. I know my mom still fights for her life each and every day; but everyday, she wins.”

* Doris’ book *Chasing the Cure* can be found in our store on our Web site under “Products That Benefit.”