

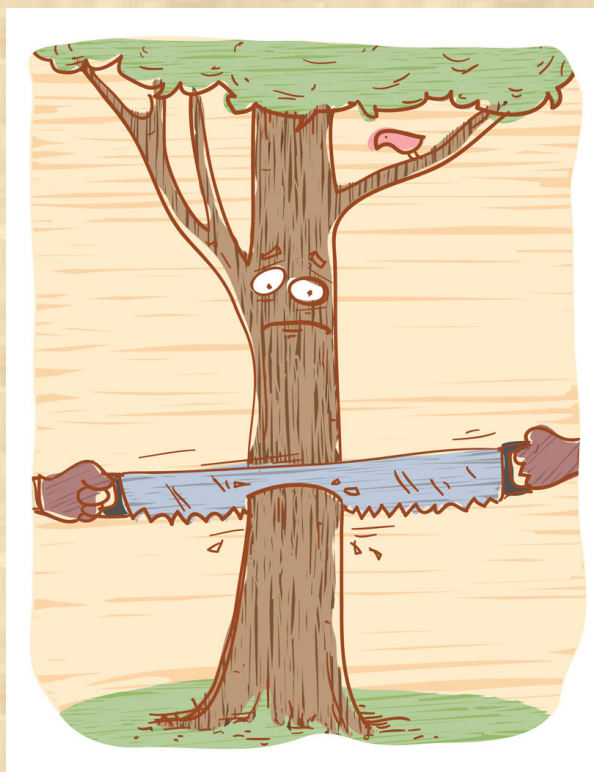
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MCSA NEWS

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Research Metaphors Define



Life Changes After Chemical Injury

Scientific Study

Research Metaphors Define Life Changes After Chemical Injury

**“Being as
Free
as a Bird,
to being
a Confined
Caged
Animal”**

Crystal Arnold and Lynn Shaw of The University of Western Ontario, and Gerald Landry of the Canadian Injured Workers’ Alliance, performed research to explore the transitions and life experiences in everyday living of an injured worker suffering from multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS).

The researchers used metaphors to facilitate the subject’s expression of deep thoughts and feelings. This helped them to understand the transition process from a worker to participating in daily life without work.

The subject was employed in the building trade prior to developing MCS as a result of 30 years of exposure to solvents and neurotoxins associated with his work. The subject was forced to resign due to the accumulation of chemical exposures which led to chronic fatigue, chronic lactic acidosis, potassium sensitivity, short-term memory loss, cognitive problems, and hypersensitivity to

chemicals (MCS) that leads to headaches, joint dislocation, “brain fog” (mind feeling “fuzzy”), redness in the face, nausea, numbness in the face and tongue, and vertigo.

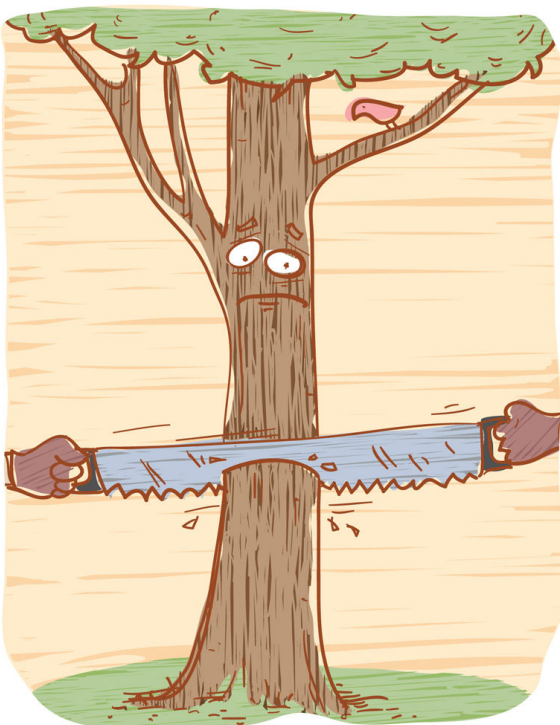
Prior to leaving work, he attempted to negotiate certain jobs which had less potential for continued exposure to chemicals. He said there were inconsistencies at work in the management of chemical exposures and safety measures to protect workers.

Consistent with similar cases, financial ruin ensued. He received disability insurance for 6 months and then had no income for the following 3 ½ years during which he was unable to work. His telephone and electric services were disconnected.

Asked to use a metaphor to describe the transition from being a worker to being an injured worker, he said:

“Being as Free as a Bird, to being a Confined Caged Animal”

He viewed being a worker as being free as a bird, something natural that he was born to do. After going on leave, he felt confined like a caged animal with no choice. Part of this confinement was financial, part due to the great difficulty it takes to avoid chemical exposures in the world. This was further compounded by the stigmatization of having a disability which is invisible to the naked eye.



**“Learning
that
Life
is Not
a
Bowl
of
Cherries”**

Asked to choose a metaphor for what he learned after becoming chemically injured, he cited:

“Learning that Life is Not a Bowl of Cherries”

This emphasizes the great feat of regaining function in everyday life. These functions include how to shop and prepare foods, managing flare-ups, planning ahead, obtaining assistance and accommodations, and figuring out new ways to socialize.

When asked what it was like to try to live in everyday life since his injury, the metaphor he chose was:

“Trying to Live in a Glass Bubble”

This described the constant process of negotiating accommodations for

accessibility to places and seeking a “glass bubble” where his symptoms are relieved. Shopping in stores and accessing places such as public transportation is nearly impossible without suffering chemical exposures, requiring him to gain a heightened awareness of potential fume exposure risks. He cited soaps, laundry products, inks on labels, perfumes worn by others, and newly painted places as problematic.

Even Christmas gifts had to be taken out of his home and returned to the store to avoid neurotoxic reactions. Avoidance, he says, is the safety strategy.

Eventually, injured workers move beyond trying to function in everyday life to a new social role and become an activist in the cause to educate others. The metaphor he chose for this is:

“Going Through the Grinder”

According to the researchers, “At each interaction with health and safety providers, he suffered due to stigma, was disbelieved, and was confronted by providers that had less knowledge than he did about chemical injuries. The injured worker explained: The Respiriologist looked at me like I was talking Martian when I questioned him 3 times to be referred to someone who dealt with [a] Chemical Solvent injury. He never responded, was silent with no response. Three days later [and] two evenings in a row I was in ER with Cardiac, respiratory symptoms.”



“Going Through the Grinder”

The sheer lack of knowledge and adequate health care pushed him to become educated about his condition and to work to educate others. For this he chose the metaphor:

“Becoming his Brother’s Keeper”

The described his passion to advocate and provide for others in the injured worker population. Many organizations are founded on this stage of becoming our brother’s keeper.

MCS is a profound and debilitating condition marked by severe life changes and stigma from others who don’t understand it and sometimes don’t believe it.

In MCS, there is a reduced ability to clear xenobiotics, which are foreign matter such as chemicals and drugs. The same dose of a chemical may not produce symptoms in a non-

MCS person because their liver can break down the substance rapidly. Whereas, a person with MCS cannot break it down quickly, leading to systemic build-up and toxic effects.

Part of this reduced ability to break substances down is due to cellular inflamma-

tion, malabsorption, and other systemic changes caused by the chemical injury. Replacing nutrients specific to liver function and antioxidants in higher doses is often recommended by treating physicians familiar with the condition.

Detoxification through sauna therapy and other means is generally also recommended. The number one treatment is avoidance, which means making the home chemical free and avoiding exposures outside the home. Exposures to all chemicals should be avoided, even those for which one is not yet sensitized. This is because people with MCS are easily sensitized to additional classes of chemicals.

Taking protective measures from chemical exposures, limiting the use of fragrances and pesticides, and avoiding occupations in which chemical exposure is imminent are the best defenses to protect against chemical injury and developing MCS.

To use another metaphor, developing MCS is like:

“Getting Cooked in the Squat”

Reference

Arnold C, Shaw L, Landry G. Using metaphors to study occupational transitions: a case study of an injured worker with multiple chemical sensitivity. *Work*. 2009;32(4):467-75.

