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### Emerging from the darkness

One woman's journey to become headache free after 27 years of daily headaches

For 27 years Shirley Gordon lived with headaches, severe headaches, migraine headaches that started when she was 20 years old. Headaches that sent pain throughout her body and were often accompanied by nausea and vomiting. Intense pain that caused Shirley to seek out the comfort of darkness, silence and isolation. Throbbing pain that medication could control to the point of being tolerable, most of the time, but no medication in the course of 27 years of treatment stopped the headaches from returning day after day.

"If you've never had a migraine, you cannot imagine the pain. It starts at the base of your neck and crawls up the back of your head. It governed my life," stated Shirley, a nursing supervisor at St. John's Regional Health Center for the past 18 years. Shirley was experiencing migraines three to four times a week. She missed many life events with her family and particularly events involving her child.

"You want to be in a dark room with no sound. Just hearing your own heart beat hurts your head."

Then five years ago the pattern of pain changed. The headache pain began on the left side of her head. This headache pain brought with it multiple symptoms, slurred speech and the inability to verbalize thoughts. "I would look at a chair and know it was a chair but I could not say it, I could not get the word out. I knew this was not a migraine. It was something more serious. I thought I had a brain tumor."

Shirley's internist, St. John's physician Dominic Meldi, M.D., sent her to a specialist on brain disorders. Neurologist Ronnie Brownsworth, M.D., diagnosed cluster headaches. A chronic headache condition that causes distress and disruption to the sufferer due to its extreme intensity and its tendency to disrupt sleep. Cluster headaches cause excruciating pain usually lasting 15 to 90 minutes located behind or around one eye. The cluster episode (the cycle of the cluster headaches) usually lasts from 3 to 16 weeks. It can occur at regular intervals of between six months to five years, with annual cluster episodes in the spring and autumn the most common. Most sufferers experience from one to three attacks daily, often at the same time of day.

With the diagnosis of cluster headaches, Shirley began a new series of medications to provide pain relief for both the migraines and the cluster headaches. Two years of adjusting and changing various prescription medications and their strengths brought some relief for her migraine headache. There seemed to be no relief for the cluster headaches.

In April of this year, a three-week illness caused Shirley to stop taking all of her medication. "At this point, Dr. Meldi told me about St. John's Headache Support Services. He suggested I look into an 'alternative approach' because all the medication could aggravate other medical problems. As a nurse, I was skeptical about the program. Its got to be documented and shown to work. After all these years, I had decided that medication was the only solution. But, I trust Dr. Meldi, so I followed his recommendation," Shirley says.

What followed was eight weeks of various types of treatment therapy provided by registered nurses, registered dietitians, exercise physiologists and a pharmacist. These professionals provided education on diet, exercise, medication and lifestyle changes.

"It was a learning experience that taught me to do different things to manage my headaches, to know what triggers them. You learn to tune into your body," said Shirley. "I learned to use an alpha stimulator (Alpha-Stim SCS unit - a hand-held instrument that applies a mild electrical current through electrodes that clip on the ear) for 20 minutes a day to realign the electric impulses in my body. I learned massage therapy (neuromuscular massage) which physically stimulates the flow of energy throughout the body. By the second week I noticed the cluster headaches were gone."

"I can't point my finger at any one thing (as a cure). It's the whole program that has eliminated the migraines and cluster headaches," Shirley said with a smile.

"My daughter said to me, 'Mom, you're a happy person. you participate (with family activities).' And I have to agree with her. There were many things I missed while she was growing up because of my headaches. You become preoccupied with the thought of how many more of these headaches are coming. You withdraw from family and friends and you're angry. Angry with others and with yourself because you can't control this consuming pain. It cuts into your lifestyle, your ability to make a living."

"As a supervisor, I had to mask my pain and discomfort while on duty, which increased the level of stress to my body. But now I like myself," Shirley said.

"This is a program that can eliminate (headache) pain. Through education, learning new skills and reducing the stress in my life, things are better. I can have a good day, a pain free day. There are people who live with migraines and cluster headaches because they don't know what to do, where to go for relief. Alternative treatment options are worth looking into. There are ways to cure your pain, get your body working in harmony," Shirley emphatically remarks.

"I told Dr. Meldi that I discovered the sky is blue. For the first time in 20 odd years, I could wake up without a headache or the fear of one later in the day. I am pain free of headaches and it's going to be a beautiful day."