



## How To Know When You're Repressing Your Feelings and What You Can Do About It

BY DR. SERENA STERLING

We all know the story of Pinocchio; the wooden puppet whose nose grew when he lied. It was also under times of stress that Pinocchio also didn't tell the truth. Although, we as human beings, do not have noses that lengthen under pressure or when we lie, our bodies react in other ways when experiencing difficult emotions. One person might develop shoulder pain while someone else could break out into hives. Physical symptoms are often your body's way of communicating feelings that weren't adequately processed and as a result, become repressed and manifest themselves in the body instead.

Read on for five ways to tell if the symptom you're experiencing could be a sign that you've repressed your feelings and find out what you can do about it.

1. **Physical Symptoms:** You develop pain or some other physical symptom that seemed to come out of nowhere. You've never had hives in your life and all of a sudden, you're breaking out every day for no apparent reason.

Or, the symptom developed after an injury but took a much longer time to heal than seems normal. That bike accident landed you in the hospital but you're still experiencing shoulder pain and it's been over a year.

Sienna came to see me in a panic. She reported that she first broke out in hives for the first time in her life and considered it was her worries about learning statistics. Having a history of being slow at math made her really nervous about passing her course. However, the hives would show up after coming home from a promising date or exercising and she didn't feel apprehensive at those times. The hives first appeared on her arms but then spread to her legs, her head and next, her lips swelled to four times their normal size.

Upon further investigation, after asking Sienna to pay attention to her self-talk, I discovered that every time she was super critical of herself, her skin would erupt in hives as if to say, "Stop being mean to me, I've had had it." She stated after statistics, she would tell herself that she was dumb and would never be able to grasp the concepts and would likely fail the class.

After her dates, even if they went well, she'd tell herself "You're too introverted and that guy will eventually see your defects and want nothing to do with you. You should cut your losses and not see him again."

Even after exercising, she'd tell herself she should be thinner, more athletic, push herself more, eat better, etc. It had become so customary for Sienna to say abrasive things to herself that it took her body reacting with hives to get her to stop and be kinder.

**Tip:** what do you say to yourself that you wouldn't consider saying to your best friend or family member? How do you feel when you say those things to yourself? What's something you worry about but don't tell anyone else? Whatever that may be could be cycling through your thoughts more than normal and could be getting stuck in your body.

2. **Pain that moves around your body:** you finally got your hip pain to go away only to develop knee pain. Once you get the knee pain to go away, a few months later you find that your shoulders hurt. This is a prime example of your body communicating that something is not being expressed, acknowledged or felt in your conscious mind and is now being experienced in your body. Until you make the connection and figure it out the pain will keep moving.

Kathryn was a personal trainer who ate well, exercised and by her appearance and energy levels, seemed to be in tip-top shape but she kept getting one nagging pain after another and couldn't figure it out. When I asked her if there was anything in her life that she wished was different, she said it would be to get out of pain. I had her write down all her feelings and when she was done, she said she felt angry, hopeless, tormented, out of ideas, stuck, inflexible, an unable to make a difference. I asked her if those feelings applied to anything or anyone else in her life, especially something she felt she couldn't change. She realized that her mom's alcoholism had the same feel to it and that no matter how much she worried and told her mom her concerns, nothing would change.

Once Kathryn was able to acknowledge this major worry in her life and chose to really have a heart to heart with her mom, the pain vanished and never returned.

**Tip:** does the pain or symptom seem to have a valid reason for being there, such as you stubbed your toe so now it hurts? Or, does it seem like there's no reason for it?

3. **Pain that won't go away:** You've seen medical doctors, physical therapists, specialists, chiropractors, acupuncturists, physiatrists, medications, even had surgery. You name it, you've tried it and the pain persists.

Roy was the best player on his basketball team in college. He was so good he got called to the pros after only one season, which seemed like a dream come true but soon after the season began, he developed shoulder pain that wouldn't go away. He went to the medical doctor who prescribed some pain meds, but the pain persisted. After speculation that the pressure was too great for him, he was sent to the foremost sports psychologist in the city but talking about his worries didn't do anything to resolve the discomfort. After rehabbing his shoulder with a top physical therapist, he started to get really scared. Nothing was working. Here he was, playing pro, living the dream and yet he was benched with a pain in his shoulder that no one could remedy.

After looking at the timeline of when his symptoms developed, I learned that Roy thrived in college. He was the big fish in a small pond, and he loved his coach who really encouraged his talent. He easily made friends who all supported his endeavors and then he was pulled out of it to pursue the NBA. When he got to his new city, he didn't have a support system, despite millions of raving fans. His buddies were many miles away and he felt he was supposed to be excited, which he was but that soon changed to dread.

The other guys on the team, who'd been there a number of years gave him a hard time, there was a lot of pressure for him to prove his worth, not just as a player but being touted as one of the best new players, and it all took a toll. Instead of knowing who to confide in, he kept

his feelings to himself and within a few months, he developed shoulder pain that would not go away.

**Tip:** what was going on in your life when the pain developed? Who was your support system? Was there anything that happened that makes you too embarrassed to admit? Like with Roy, he felt bad for being upset with not adapting to making millions and thriving in the NBA. If there are sentiments you know you think about but would be timid to disclose to a close friend or family member, then look there for clues as to what you're keeping to yourself.

4. **Pain or Symptoms that happen in response to the same stimuli:** When you develop constipation and anxiety before and during a visit to your mother and notice this happens every time, that's not a coincidence. That a physical response to difficult emotions.

Lisa noticed that every time she drove to work, her palms would get really sweaty. Soon after arriving at her office, the symptoms would go away but if she had a big meeting or a presentation, the symptoms would return. Driving home, her palms were fine. She was embarrassed and it was weighing on her confidence. She tried not shaking hands but then that brought attention to her issues.

When we looked at what made her so anxious, it had to do with her fear of failure and letting others down. We pinpointed how she felt similar when her dad would tell her that her grades weren't good enough or when her mom would question her taste in men. She felt like nothing was ever good enough, but she yearned for their approval just like he wanted the approval of her boss and executives.

**Tip:** What kind of symptom do you develop in response to a situation that represents something stressful-an exam, a big meeting or presentation, your in-laws, your brother you dislike. What might your symptoms be trying to tell you?

5. **Doctors tell you there's nothing wrong.** When diagnostic tests show no abnormality, yet you feel unwell, have persistent pain, and everything you've tried doesn't work, you could be repressing your feelings and until you figure out what it is that you didn't want to feel or express, you won't figure out the cause of the discomfort..

Consider these five points to help you know when you might have repressed your feelings. Pay attention to your thoughts and feelings, especially the ones that keep swirling around your mind with no release. Those are the ones most likely to eventually get repressed and end up in the body as a physical symptom.

**I'm Serena Sterling.** I help people with physical and emotional pain feel better fast. When the time is right, let me know if I can support you: [serena@drserenasterling.com](mailto:serena@drserenasterling.com)