Suzanne Ely was not yet 30 when she began to notice numbness and tingling in the fingers of her right hand. Then came the fiery pains, as shallow as electrical shocks, that shot up and down the inside of her right arm from wrist to elbow.

She couldn’t figure it out. She hadn’t hurt her arm in any way. Finally, she realized that the injury was probably the hours and hours of taking notes by hand each day at her job. Little by little, the pain bit into her ability to do the simplest things – like opening the door to her office.

The Menlo Park woman wasn’t a complainer. “I love what I do and I didn’t want not to work,” she said. That was why, when doctors said she could never what they believed to be the problematic nerve, she took a chance. But that surgery, and then another, didn’t work. If anything, the pain was worse, hardly altering Ely’s life. After six months of not being able to work and isolated by increasing depression, frustration and dependence on others to do even small tasks, she turned for help conveniently close to home.

“With her pains diminished, Suzanne Ely says she can feel the breeze and enjoy a day in the sun.”

“Think differently about pain.”

“The Pain Center will more next year to the new Stanford Medicine Outpatient Center in Redwood City, to con- wend and enlarge its clinical space.”

Cutting-edge therapies to regain a good life

Mackey’s team has headed ground-breaking clinical trials in the use of MRI technology to reveal the location of the brain's pain centers and how people might learn to control their pain. “It’s all about improving a patient’s quality of life,” Mackey said. “What people want most is to take back control of their life.”

“It’s all about improving a patient’s quality of life.”

“That’s what Ely wanted to do, of course. The Stanford Pain Center is the location for more than three dozen trials for new treatments which often can become part of its patients’ treatment plans, as one did for Ely. She was an early recipient of one of the Center’s newest approaches – brain implanted stimulators to convert pain to a tingling, sensation.”

Engaging the brain to change pain

Mackey is excited about emerging tools to improve outcomes, including Ely’s – new medications to target specific locations in the nervous system, new interventional treatment programs to prevent pain and new methods to determine whether a certain patient will respond to a certain treatment. Where Stanford’s Pain Center is most ad- vanced is neuroimag- ing to create very clear windows into the brain to watch how it re- sponds and generates pain. “We can learn to take advantage of the power of the brain to change,” he said, “and that those changes can have a real impact on our whole body’s physiology – for the better.”

“Engaging the brain to change pain.”

Ely worked her way through the package of treatments designed for her – the nerve blocks, medication, physical and psychological therapy and acu- puncture – each with its own impact. But one of chore pain’s uncom- fortable realities is that sometimes there is no complete fix. That’s hard to accept in an age where medicine has conquered so many ailments. Then, the goal at the pain clinic becomes changing chronic pain from incapac- itating to manageable. “No one should be sentenced to live with pain for ever,” said Dr. Ian Carroll, a pain center doctor. “We can help people live a better life despite it.”

Ely’s pain isn’t completely gone, but her treatment at Stanford gave her back her independence and her work. Now, she understands the role played in her pain by anxiety and distress and has tools, including mind- fulness meditation which she learned at Stanford, to ease her ability to moderate her stress, prevent flare-ups and get a good night’s sleep.

“I’m getting the strength back in my arm. I have tried a lot and I know it could be worse,” Ely said, “but I am able to work and I can lead a relatively normal life.” Once again, she can cook, open doors and work full days, as well as do these simple acts so important for a balanced, full life. “I am able to carry things. I couldn’t carry – like my four-year-old nephew! I have definitely improved.”