

Interview – How Marcia Cross Handles Her Pain

by [Teri Robert, PhD](#)

Marcia Cross is enjoying life, marriage, a successful career as an actress and – last but not least -- motherhood. She's possibly most recognizable as Bree Van De Kamp on "Desperate Housewives."

Marcia also has a chronic pain issue, Migraines. You may have seen her in a television commercial, encouraging people to see a doctor for diagnosis if they have "frequent bad headaches." Marcia was kind enough to spend some time talking with me about Migraine disease, how she handles her Migraines, and why she thinks it's important to be properly diagnosed and treated. Since she was also kind enough to allow me to record that conversation, I can share it with you verbatim...



ROBERT: Good morning. Thank you for setting aside the time to talk with me, Miss Cross.

CROSS: Oh, sure.

ROBERT: I also want to thank you for being willing to share your experiences with Migraine disease. It has to be hard enough to retain your privacy given your celebrity status, but it helps so much when well known public figures are willing to speak out as you are.

CROSS: You're welcome. You know it's a good thing and hopefully it's done some good.

ROBERT: Something quite a few of my readers have wondered about is how frequently you have Migraine attacks.

CROSS: I've been really lucky lately. I haven't had any since I've been pregnant. So I probably won't a doctor told me who actually knows a lot about Migraines. It doesn't mean I won't on the other end. I feel like I've gotten them down to really minimal, three to four a year. So I'm really doing well, which was not the case in the beginning. It was much more frequently, and I'm sure it would be if I hadn't changed my lifestyle. I really watch stress, and my trigger foods, and all the things I need to do to stay Migraine-free. I just cannot stand that pain. For me, I just have to go home and get in a dark room and wait for it to pass. But waiting for it to pass still involves some pain.

ROBERT: Some? (both laugh) I've had Migraines since I was six so I sympathize with you.

CROSS: So how are yours now?

ROBERT: Working with a Migraine specialist, I'm down to about as few as you are.

CROSS: Isn't that unbelievable?

ROBERT: Yes. Isn't it wonderful? We couldn't have this even 10 years ago.

CROSS: No, we couldn't.

ROBERT: Could not have done it. We didn't know enough.

CROSS: No.

ROBERT: Have you been able to manage your Migraines with trigger management and abortive medication, or do you use any over-the-counter or prescription preventives at all?

CROSS: No preventatives, but I carry medicine with me at all times.

ROBERT: From your holiday tips, it's really obvious that you place the appropriately strong emphasis on trigger management.

CROSS: Well, yes, because that's the time of year when everybody stresses. Needlessly, I might add, because it's really not the point of the holiday. You know, if you don't have the perfect present or if the turkey's a little overcooked.

ROBERT: No, of course, it's not. Thank you!

CROSS: It's not worth getting a Migraine over as far as I'm concerned.

ROBERT: Absolutely. Your family wants **you**, and what good are you with a Migraine?

CROSS: None. **You're** not there.

ROBERT: What are your triggers, Marcia?

CROSS: Oh, gosh. Red wine, chocolate, cheddar cheese, oranges. Those are my mainstays that I just really don't touch. Things can happen too if – I don't really drink much, but if I do drink a little too much of anything, alcohol's not good in general. And then being stressed out can definitely... I work really hard now that I don't stress the way that I used to. I'm not as internally tightly wound as I used to be. (laugh)

ROBERT: Don't you think Migraines teach us a lot about ourselves?

CROSS: Yeah, they do! And sometimes what would happen to me in the old days is that I would go through something incredibly stressful forgetting all about it, and I wasn't taking care of myself. And after it was all over was when I'd get just a searing Migraine. It would kind of wait until the stress peaked, and then when I let go, I'd get the Migraine. And I'd be like, gosh, I didn't even realize that I'd been stressing so badly. Now I don't let that happen.

ROBERT: Did you do an elimination diet to identify food triggers or were they so obvious that you didn't need to do that?

CROSS: I just wrote them down so if they were more than once they seemed pretty obvious over time. But I didn't do that for a long while, which I wish I'd started earlier, but it's that kind of thing where you're just kind of a victim to something and

then you sort of say, "Now I've gotta do whatever I can to be my own health advocate and change this." I think that's one of the reasons it's good to speak out because people can do things to be healthier and feel better. Even just getting diagnosed and having medication. I have a friend who would suffer with them and then the husband would run over for my medication. I'd be like, "It's too late! Go to the doctor. This happens every two months." It's just kind of things go along and they think they're not going to have another or they don't even know they're having them (Migraines). Everybody's busy. I don't know what it is, but it was like it was not quite bad enough to take care of it, where like for you and I, we had to.

ROBERT: Right. I think part of it is that people don't want to look at Migraine as a disease whereas they wouldn't hesitate to do something if they had thyroid disease or diabetes. So you wonder why is it that they hesitate to do something about Migraine disease.

CROSS: I think it's because they get confused that it's just a headache, a really bad headache. I think you really don't understand how it happens and that it's not; it's something different. I think when people get that in their heads, they can say, "Oh, it's a bad headache." That's my guess. You know?

ROBERT: Maybe partly it's because it's an episodic disease. It doesn't affect them every day.

CROSS: Right. So a little time will pass and who wants to go to the doctor? So I think it just slips by.

ROBERT: Other than avoiding your triggers, what lifestyle methods do you use to minimize their impact?

CROSS: I really think that having done a lot of work on my inside has really helped too just because as you get older, you sort of take life with a little more ease. So, any sort of work you do just kind of be at peace with your own day and your own situation is helpful. Having that threat around really keeps things modulated because is it really worth it when you start getting tense or uptight about something? I think that really has made a difference. Yoga, I love to hike, just let things go. Keep things in perspective. A lot of it has to do with how we view whatever's going on with us. One can work oneself up into that amount of stress. Nobody is really doing it to you. You can look at a situation in a completely different way that takes that out of the picture.

ROBERT: I know you're involved in a campaign encouraging people with "frequent bad headaches" to see their doctors for diagnosis. In your own words, why is this so important?

CROSS: Gosh, I just think... I guess because it's been so awful for me, it was so terrible.. I wouldn't say that anymore... It's been such a painful journey, especially in the beginning when I didn't know what was happening, and I would have those early symptoms of my fingers tingling or that weird peripheral vision thing. I remember not being able to remember my friends' names or phone numbers when I was with them. It's absolutely terrifying. You feel like you're having a stroke or something. I think finding out about it, getting medication, learning to take care of myself -- it puts you in an entirely different place from being a victim of something that's happening to you. That would be why. Because I feel there's something you can do

about it.

ROBERT: I love so much of what you're saying because we no longer have to be controlled by this disease. We can control it instead of it controlling us. There's so much more we can do for Migraine than we could do for some other diseases.

ROBERT: As we've learned more about Migraine as a disease, and as we in general have learned so much over the last few years, have you found that attitudes people around have about Migraines are changing?

CROSS: I hope so. I hope people are getting much more educated today about the difference between a Migraine and a headache and the fact that there are things you can do. Certainly when I was younger, I didn't know what it was. I didn't know anything about it. I didn't know to get diagnosed. I didn't know there was anything I could do about it. Hopefully, just the information getting out there and people taking care of it sooner, then that will help.

ROBERT: Then I read about the colleague you worked with on "Melrose Place" who told you about the abortive medications?

CROSS: Yes, she had the Imitrex shot, and it was right after that I went to the doctor, and I started taking the pills. So that was a life changer. You really want to try to not even get to that point because it's just better not to.

ROBERT: I've read that your husband is really understanding, that you told him about your Migraines early on, and he's super hubby. He's supportive and takes care of you.

CROSS: He said to me, "What does a headache feel like?" because he's never had a headache. Forget about a Migraine, he's never had a headache.

ROBERT: It also sounds like you've had fairly good luck with doctors, with them taking you seriously?

CROSS: Yes, but it took me a long time to get to one. Yes, but I also have a very classic case with Migraines with the aura, so it was easily diagnosed.

ROBERT: Do you actually go ahead and start your treatment when you notice the aura instead of waiting for the headache?

CROSS: Absolutely immediately, yes.

ROBERT: If you were to speak directly to my readers, is there anything else you would say to them?

CROSS: I would just say not to be a victim and to be your own health advocate, and to take it into your own hands. You actually can affect the number of Migraines you have and your quality of life, and it's worth the effort. It will increase your entire healthy lifestyle **and** reduce your Migraines, so it's a win-win situation, I think.

ROBERT: What is the worst symptom of the Migraine for you? Is it the headache?

CROSS: Well, certainly that's the most painful, but the most frightening really used

to be the loss of my short-term memory or the ability to think. They don't start that severely any more. They just start with the aura, but it used to be that would just terrify me. It's a different kind of pain, and there's the fear and that terror that you're losing your mind. So there are two extremes (the headache and effects on thinking), but neither pleasant.

ROBERT: Thank you again for your time and being so open with us.

CROSS: Oh, you're welcome.

As Marcia mentioned, if you have "headaches," getting a diagnosis is essential. You can go to www.headachequiz.com to take a quiz and get more information to help you when talking with your doctor.

Note: Marcia Cross is a paid spokeswoman for GlaxoSmithKline.

Source:

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