

COPING WITH CHRONIC PAIN

What is Chronic Pain? Chronic pain is pain that goes on longer than six months and does not respond to conventional medical treatment. In other words, chronic pain is pain that may not go away. In addition, chronic pain often has no concrete explanation and no tangible diagnosis. That does not mean that chronic pain is not real. It simply means that, using the information available today, modern medical specialists cannot define a "cause" for the pain or do not have a "cure" available for the pain. Thus, chronic pain is pain that you must "learn to live with." The question is then, "How do you do that?" Unfortunately, chronic pain patients are often told by their physicians that they will just have to learn to live with it, but are not given any information or training to help them in that process.

Issues Chronic Pain Persons Must Deal With

You are the one who feels the pain and suffers with it. However, chronic pain also affects everyone around you. When pain begins, others are usually supportive and caring. As time goes by, those around a chronic pain patient often become frustrated and less supportive (at the same time the pain patient and his/her physician (s) are also becoming frustrated). In response to the pain and loss of support, people with chronic pain often withdraw from many activities. Soon people find that large parts of their lives feel controlled by their pain. As you can see chronic pain creates many different types of suffering.

The pain that you feel in your body is only one factor that contributes to your suffering. Other issues that can increase your suffering are:

Isolation: Believing you are the only one in the world who has chronic pain can create a sense of hopelessness. Your pain can cause you to withdraw from all social and family support systems.

Confusion: Chronic pain, in many cases, has no visible signs. Your level of pain changes daily. It is not surprising that those around you may question the reality of your pain. Likewise, it is not unusual for you to question whether or not your pain is real--you may sometimes believe it is all in your head.

Uncertainty: Is it all in my head? The answer is partly. You cannot separate the mind and body. What you experience physically affects your emotional well-being and vice versa. The lack of a diagnosis--a reason for your pain--can cause you to question the reality of your suffering. Even with a diagnosis, you may find it hard to believe that modern medicine cannot "fix" you.

Suffering: If you have chronic pain, you will suffer. If you give your undivided attention to your pain, your suffering will be overwhelming. If, however, you can redirect your attention to other issues, your sense of suffering can be reduced.

Guilt: Your reduced ability to contribute at work or at home creates a sense of guilt. You may believe that your value is measured by the amount of work you accomplish.

Anger: You may be angry with the medical community for not making you better. You may be angry with your co-workers for not understanding. You may be angry with your friends and family for not being more supportive and understanding. And, you may be angry at yourself for not having the ability to "get better."

Self Management versus Medical Management

Acute pain conditions require medical management where as chronic pain conditions require self-management. Before explaining why this is the case, let me first define these terms..

Acute pain is short term. Depending on the nature of the injury, appropriate medical treatment is sought and leads to healing. The pain ends when the injury heals. The pain serves as a useful warning sign (i.e., a symptom of injury or disease).

On the other hand, *chronic pain* persists longer (usually defined as more than 6 months). It may be a sign of an underlying disease or may exist in the absence of an underlying disease. Chronic pain persists long after the initial injury has healed and thus it no longer serves as a useful warning function.

Medical management places the responsibility for care solely on the health care provider. The emphasis is on physical procedures (e.g., medications, surgery, nerve blocks). The goal of medical management is pain relief.

Self management places the responsibility on the individual with the pain condition. There is less emphasis on physical procedures, focusing more on emotional, mental, behavioral and social factors in combination with physical rehabilitation. The primary goal is to cope more effectively with pain and to restore maximal functioning.

Since healing has taken place in a chronic condition, there is often no treatment that will fix the pain problem. Consequently, the health care provider is left with only treatments that provide temporary symptom relief (e.g., medications) or that sometimes worsen the pain condition (e.g., surgery). As noted above, chronic pain also impacts much more than just the body. Treatment requires more than just a procedure on the body. It requires the patient to take an active role in learning to manage their condition.

Setting Realistic Goals

Unfortunately, being pain free is rarely a realistic goal. More realistic goals might include: reducing suffering, learning to live with the pain, learning to enjoy life, regaining control of your life, increasing activity, etc. Setting realistic goals provides a focus for your energy and enables your goals to be achieved (as compared to unrealistic goals). When you are devoting your time and energy to things you really want to do and can accomplish, there is less time to think about your pain. The less you think about your pain, the less you will suffer.

In order to set realistic goals, you first need to learn from your doctor what limitations are medically required. Along with identifying restrictions comes the recognition of the difference between *hurt* and *harm*. When people first injure themselves, pain serves as a signal that harm has been caused to the body (acute pain). The natural and healthy response is to stop doing whatever is causing the pain (e.g., walking on a sprained ankle, lifting with a strained back). In this case, harm is being done to the body and the body's warning system (pain) is working properly. However, as we noted earlier, in chronic pain healing has occurred but pain remains. Thus, the body's warning system is no longer working properly. In other words, the pain no longer indicates harm is being done to the body. Therefore, stopping the activity which is causing the pain is often not indicated. When activity is stopped, over time pain can often worsen due to the deterioration of the body from lack of use. Ask your doctor what activities may be harmful and don't do them. Those that hurt but are not harmful can be gradually resumed.

Setting realistic goals also requires appropriate pacing. It is common for people with chronic pain to be very inactive during episodes of severe pain. Often laying or sitting for extended periods. Since pain naturally cycles through more and less severe episodes, the person will likely experience some pain relief. In response to the decreased pain, they will often try and make up for all the things they were unable to do during the severe pain episode (i.e., they over do it). Since their body has become deconditioned during these extended periods of inactivity, even resumption of normal life activity can result in resumption of pain. As a result, a cyclical pattern of under doing it followed by over doing it is created.

To pace properly, you should try to develop an activity routine of alternating "uptime" and "downtime". In other words, alternate between more and less physically demanding activities. This routine involves stopping or changing activity when the pain level goes up a point or two (i.e., before it becomes unbearable and you stop all activity). You should continue to do this throughout the day.

Movement can be difficult when you are in pain. Yet, it is important to maintain a certain level of activity to maintain good muscle tone and reduce pain levels. Your doctor or physical therapist will help you select several realistic exercises that will help you to restore movement and tone muscles. Remember, your activity level has decreased over a long period. Your exercise program should be slow, realistic, and continuous.

Learn to Relax

Tension causes increased pain. Relaxation techniques are effective in reducing tension. Recognizing tension is the first step. Knowing how to reduce tension is a learned skill. Relaxation is an effective means to reduce physical tension, which worsens pain and increases your ability to manage the unrelieved pain.