



How Can We Cope With Chronic Pain?

by ROSS FLOOD

This article is written from a layperson's perspective, albeit from one who has endured chronic pain from three spinal surgeries and other sports injuries. While the article examines the physical causes of pain, the theme is using alternative methods to cope with chronic pain.

Pain has been scientifically defined as an unpleasant, emotional and sensory experience, associated with actual or potential tissue damage. Pain is the body's method of self-preservation as it tells you when a fall has resulted in an injury. In this way, pain acts as a warning sign to alert you when damage is occurring or may occur to your body. If your body lacks the ability to experience pain, it is a dangerous condition because an injury or illness may go unnoticed.

Pain is generally classified into two main types: acute and chronic. Acute pain gets your attention. Acute pain is usually short-lived and is associated with tissue damage and the pain typically disappears through the course of normal healing. There is a purpose for acute pain and with its short-term nature, psychological reactions usually do not persist.

Chronic pain can continue for longer than six months and patients may endure pain for years and even most of their lives. Pain may result from an injury (back or knee) or ongoing medical condition (arthritis, cancer or shingles). It may also occur for no diagnosable reason. It may hurt all the time or on and off – but it limits everyday functioning and can contribute to other stressors like sleep problems, side effects of medication, reduced capacity for performing work, financial hardships and relationship problems. Often we're asked to rate our pain level on a scale of 0 to 10. However, each person may have his or her own assessment that may not be consistent when describing the pain level to a health care provider. Karen Lee Richards has devised a Pain Scale that rates pain from 0 (pain free) to 10 (unspeakable pain). The Pain Scale can be found at www.healthcentral.com/chronic-pain/coping-403768-5.html and can be used to accurately assess and describe your pain level to health professionals.

Chronic pain is distressing because of its negative influence on a person's life. It affects them in various ways:

- physically – with sensations of discomfort
- emotionally – with feelings of helplessness and hopelessness
- psychologically – with symptoms and episodes of depression
- socially – as they sink into isolation
- occupationally – as work and job tasks become more difficult to complete

Uncertainty may exist as to the cause of the pain and this will often increase anxiety, which in turn increases pain. Emotional issues can clearly accentuate the perception of pain. Once patients have an explanation for their pain and a treatment plan in place, many patients tolerate pain much better. There is a vicious cycle to chronic pain and health problems can lead to increased stress in your life; stress causes muscle tension and muscle tension increases chronic pain. Pain management techniques and strategies can disrupt this stress-tension-pain cycle.

Strategies for Coping with Chronic Pain: Relaxation

Chronic pain is both physically and emotionally stressful, and this physical and mental tension can, in turn, make the pain worse. Planned, purposeful relaxation can help break the pain-stress cycle by lowering heart rate and blood pressure, relaxing tense muscles, reducing anxiety, and giving you a sense of control and well-being. The relaxation referred to here involves learning ways to calm your body and mind.

Tips for Relaxing

- Find a quiet place free of surrounding distractions. Darken the room and take the phone off the hook and shut down cell phones. Dedicate this as time to yourself with no interruptions.
- Playing a tape of soothing music or nature sounds may be helpful, although some relaxation therapists

suggest no background music.

- Sit in a comfortable position on a chair or the floor.
- To be effective, deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery, meditation, or other relaxation methods should be practised for a minimum of 10-20 minutes on a daily basis.

You'll also want to try relaxation tapes and CDs. Some offer soothing nature sounds and music while others provide spoken words and instructions for you to follow along during your session.

Guided Imagery

Use your imagination to take you to a calm, peaceful place. Take a walk through a country lane, around a mountain lake, or along a pristine beach. Hear the soothing sounds of nature – the sounds of waves rolling on a beach, the rustle of the leaves on the trees. Feel the gentle breeze on your face. This is what guided imagery is all about, and the results can be wonderful. For more on guided imagery, go to: http://health.yahoo.com/health/Alternative_Medicine/Alternative_Therapies/Guided_Imagery

Exercise

Exercise is an important component to your pain management program. Regular exercise improves your flexibility, your aerobic conditioning, and your muscle strength. It can also serve to help your self-confidence and reduce anxiety and depression. An overall improved fitness level also helps to keep you healthy while also helping to control your pain.

Tips for Starting an Exercise Program

- Be sure to discuss with your doctor what an appropriate level of physical activity is for you. Start slowly. Whenever beginning a new exercise program, start with just a few exercises and slowly add on more.
- Listen to your body while you exercise, and afterwards as well. If you start to have too much pain, stop doing the exercise. Learn to recognize what is an appropriate level of exercise for you. Be careful if exercising with a friend who does not have a chronic pain condition.
- Discuss your exercises and symptoms with your doctor or physical therapist to learn the difference between normal discomfort and too much pain through exercise.

(continued)

Heat and Cold Treatments

Heat and cold treatments are effective for alleviating pain and stiffness due to arthritis. The heat treatments help to relax muscles and can be applied through moist heat (e.g. bath or hydro collar pack) or dry heat methods (heating pad or heat lamp). Cold treatments work by numbing the sore area and reducing inflammation, and are especially good for severe joint pain and swelling.

Managing Your Stress

Stress and fatigue increase pain, so stress manage-

Tips for Heat & Cold Treatments

Follow the advice of your doctor or physical therapist concerning the use of these treatments.

- Use for the appropriate time limit. Heat and cold treatments should be used only 15-20 minutes at a time.
- Avoid extreme temperatures. Take care to assure that your treatment is not too hot or too cold, and do not use treatments if your skin has open sores or cuts.
- Protect your skin. When using packs, always place a towel between the pack and your skin for protection. After each treatment, check the area and allow your skin to return to room temperature before using another treatment.

ment is an important component of pain management. While this includes relaxation strategies such as those discussed above, a complete stress management program means looking at your schedule, planning your day, and setting your priorities. It includes scheduling your “appointments” for taking care of self – having time for activity, but also rest and recovery. It is important to get a good night’s sleep for restoring your energy and spirits that enable you to more effectively deal with each day. Look at the activities you can manage each day while learning to say “no” to requests that will overtax you. On vacation travel, determine beforehand what activities, excursions, side trips you would like, restricting them to those that you can physically and emotionally manage.

Learning to Manage Your Energy

Just as you budget your finances, you can budget your energy. Chronic pain sufferers often find their energy levels can vary daily as well as day-to-day. There is an envelope method used for budgeting in which you place your weekly amounts needed to pay for everyday costs into an appropriately labelled envelope. When your envelope is empty, you’ve used your allotted money for that week. A similar method for allotting your energy has been developed by

Karen Lee Richards and can be found at www.healthcentral.com/chronic-pain/coping-193627-5.html.

Conclusion

Educate yourself. Becoming informed and knowledgeable about your condition and effective pain management strategies is one of the most effective things you can do for yourself. Remember that rarely does one type of treatment or technique meet all your needs. Using multiple treatment approaches to form a comprehensive pain management program can go a long way in producing the best results for coping with pain (The Health Authority). Pain clinics, personal counselling and stress management techniques may be helpful in dealing with the emotional burdens caused by chronic pain. Explore what options work best for you.

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