

# Psychology of Pain

Pain management as a specialty focuses on diagnosis and treatment of pain utilizing a variety of techniques. Sometimes medications, injections, physical therapy and surgery help reduce pain only to a point. When these therapies have done the best they can do, and there is still pain, a variety of psychological therapies can help. These techniques can help the pain sufferer by teaching mental strategies that reduce pain. They can also be helpful by enabling the pain sufferer to deal with pain related job, marital, sexual, sleep, family or other problems.

## **Pain causes Stress and Stress causes Pain**

This is a vicious cycle of stress and pain that many people who suffer from pain get caught in. Pain causes stress by causing the person to interact differently with others- he or she may snap at others more easily. There can be financial losses from inability to work, which can further stress relationships. Marriages can crumble under the weight of such pressures. Thus, pain is causing stress. When someone is under stress, the muscles get tense, headaches can start, and the ability to withstand pain is reduced. Thus, pain can cause stress, and stress causes more pain, and on and on.

The area of stress and pain most people can identify with is headaches. Often once stresses are identified and controlled, the frequency and duration of headaches can be reduced. The importance of identifying stress and pain associations is that if stressors are not identified, chronic pain can lead to a 'secondary' depression.

## **Depression and chronic pain linked**

As seen above, depression can be caused by pain. The reverse is also true. Depression can cause pain. Because the two are so closely linked, it is wise to screen people with chronic pain to ascertain how the pain is affecting their life. Thus, problems can be identified and treated appropriately before a crisis is reached. Depression can be treated with a variety of medications and psychological techniques.

## **Suicide**

Chronic pain can lead to suicidal thoughts and actions. All age groups can be victims. For instance, it is believed that pain from shingles is one of the leading causes of suicide in people over age 80. Cancer related suicide has become a debated topic in the media. Dr. Kevorkian has made controversial medical decisions in helping cancer patients die. This should not have to be an option. A good pain specialist can help in many ways, so that suicide should never need to be an option.

## **Assessment**

The most widely used assessment tool for objective analysis of pain patients is the *MMPI* (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory), a very long questionnaire that helps the treating doctor assess emotional disorders that occur because of pain, or pre-existing problems that would affect pain treatment. It is important to remember that taking the test in no way implies that the treating team believes the pain is not real.

## **Cognitive/Behavioral Therapy**

For pain management, these are the two most common techniques specialists employ for treatment. One such approach is called cognitive therapy. Cognitive therapy is an approach based on the concept that a person's moods and emotions are determined by their thought. Moods and emotions effect pain. Thus by modifying thoughts, pain can be reduced. Another successful is called behavioral therapy. Behavioral therapy focuses on inappropriate behaviors that make recovery difficult. For example stress may cause the person to tense the muscles, which causes pain. The therapist will try to enable you to relax your muscles and thus decrease pain.

## **An example**

### **Progressive Relaxation Breathing**

No matter where you are, you can relax your muscles to relieve tension and pain. By learning how to relax muscles one by one, you will find you can relax your entire body.

1. Get comfortable. Close your eyes. Starting at the top of your body, tense your forehead and face. Do you notice how tight they feel? Hold this tension for 10 seconds.

2. Next, relax your forehead and face. Do you notice the relief you feel? Hold and enjoy this relaxation for 10-15 seconds.
3. Now work toward your feet. First tense and relax your jaw muscles. Proceed to the muscles in each shoulder, arm and hand, then to your stomach, buttocks, each thigh, calf and ankle/foot.
4. If you have trouble relaxing some muscles, or if the tension brings on pain, try gently massaging that body part until the muscles relax and feel comfortable.
5. To complete the exercise, open your eyes and stretch, and relax your entire body. Take a few deep breaths as if you're waking up from a deep sleep. Don't engage in any activity until you're fully alert.

### **Summary**

Combined with medications, psychological treatment of problems that cause or are caused by pain can be effective in allowing an individual live a more meaningful, functional life.

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