

CHRONIC PAIN AND MENTAL HEALTH

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WHAT IS CHRONIC PAIN?

Everyone experiences physical pain at some point in their life. But many people experience chronic pain, meaning pain that lasts 12 weeks or more. Chronic pain is distinguished by its frequency, intensity, and the length of time it lasts. Unfortunately, many people deal with chronic pain for months and even years.

CAUSES OF CHRONIC PAIN

Often, chronic pain is a direct result of an injury or ongoing chronic illness, while other times there may be no well-defined cause. This can make treatment significantly more difficult and frustrating and may lead to feeling alone, hopeless, and helpless in one's suffering.

STATISTICS

According to a study conducted by the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy, one in 10 Americans experience pain every day for three months or more. Some of the most common types of chronic pain include low back pain (27%), headache/migraine (15%), neck pain (15%), and facial pain (4%).

EFFECTS ON MENTAL HEALTH

Living with chronic pain can cause persistent feelings of hopelessness and helplessness, disruptive sleep cycles, and irritable moods, all of which can lead to depression and anxiety. Many sufferers state that chronic pain has impacted their overall enjoyment of life, with more than 60% reporting they feel depressed and/or have problems sleeping. Depression, anxiety, and lack of sleep often make the pain worse, creating an extremely frustrating cycle of pain and restlessness.

MANAGING PAIN BEFORE IT MANAGES YOU

Whether a condition is physical or psychological, a holistic approach is helpful, even essential, meaning any treatment plan needs to take into account biological, psychological, spiritual, and social needs. The practical lifestyle suggestions on the next page are recommended to help deal with chronic pain.

BIOLOGICAL SELF-CARE

- **Proper diet:** An anti-inflammatory diet may help avoid inflammation and reduce the amount or intensity of “flare-ups.”
- **Exercise:** Engaging in appropriate exercise can help reduce inflammation, increase energy, and increase release of endorphins, the body’s natural pain killer chemicals.
- **Heat and ice:** Ice helps numb initial pain and reduce inflammation, while heat can be used to treat ongoing aches and pains. A hot shower or bath, sitting in a hot tub or sauna are all possibilities for everyday lifestyle adjustments.
- **Medical doctor:** Consulting a medical professional to discover causes as well as treatment possibilities for easing and/or managing pain should be part of any chronic pain treatment plan.

SOCIAL SELF-CARE

- **Social support groups:** Connecting with others who are experiencing the same struggles can be a source of relief and support, and can also be a resource for discovering helpful coping tips and ideas.
- **Events/activities that bring happiness:** Although chronic pain may limit particular activities, many activities can be easily modified to allow participation. Hobbies utilize creativity and provide opportunities to learn, grow and connect with others who share a similar interest/passion.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SELF-CARE

- **Counseling:** Process what it’s like to live with chronic pain and learn new coping skills.
- **Mindfulness:** Focus on the present moment, while acknowledging and accepting one’s feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations. Activities such as yoga or meditation can help achieve habit changes, stress reduction, and overall self-care.
- **Laughter:** Find what makes you laugh. Humor is not only helpful but healthful in daily life.
- **Music:** Music can help improve mood. Create an uplifting playlist to listen to when feeling down.
- **Journaling:** Journaling is a convenient and private way to release pent-up emotional tensions, promoting the ability to process thoughts and feelings.
- **Gratitude:** “A few of my favorite things” is not just good song lyrics; it’s a good coping strategy. Reflecting on a list of positive things, people and circumstances can help take the edge off daily struggles.

SPIRITUAL SELF-CARE

- **Prayer and meditation:** Prayer and meditation are proven methods of helping those who suffer from chronic pain. A spiritual perspective brings mindfulness which may aid in developing a different perception of pain and suffering, and thus contribute to more positive feelings.
- **Groups:** Joining a small group Bible study, either online or in person, can be a powerful part of spiritual self-care by building community and belonging.



REFERENCES

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