



Gentle Path
COUNSELLING SERVICES
For the seasons of our lives

DEALING WITH CHRONIC PAIN, BY: MARY SCOTT

Anyone who has tried to live with chronic pain can tell you how difficult it is to meet the daily requirements of the job. This is the case for those who perform physical labour and for those with more sedentary office jobs. Chronic pain conditions lead to a decrease in productivity, greater absenteeism, and increased stress due to pressure to perform one's job better. This is in addition to the havoc chronic pain can raise in our personal lives away from the working environment.

Chronic pain, unlike its counterpart, acute pain, results from totally different situations. Acute pain is the body's way of signalling to us that damage is being done. We feel it when we break a bone, tear a muscle, or burn our hands. The amount of acute pain we experience usually relates to the amount of actual tissue damage done to the area. Acute pain gets better over time and, with medical intervention, it usually goes away completely. Resting the injured area and taking pain medication (often a narcotic) are appropriate treatments.

On the other hand, chronic pain is a persistent condition that often comes from an episode of acute pain but continues well after healing time would normally take place. It serves no beneficial purpose (other than to remind us to slow down) and it is very resistant to medical intervention. Inactivity is usually not an appropriate treatment. There is current debate concerning the appropriateness of narcotics in the treatment of chronic pain.

The bottom line is that chronic pain is a demoralizing situation that confronts the individual--not only with the stress of the pain, but with many other continuing stressors which upset many, if not all, aspects of life.

COMMON PAIN BELIEFS

There are a number of faulty pain beliefs that people hold concerning their chronic pain. These beliefs tend to prevent people from effectively dealing with their pain.

•We've learned that pain means something is wrong. While this is true of acute pain, it is not true of chronic pain. A person with chronic pain goes to a doctor looking for both a diagnosis and a cure. However, when the doctor recommends treatment involving such things as exercise, relaxation techniques and perhaps less or no medication use, the person can become confused. This is contrary to popular pain beliefs. The person may question why the doctor can't just 'cure' the pain, given all the medical knowledge available these days. This faulty belief leads to low motivation for following treatment instructions.

- Many people with chronic pain may believe the pain will persist no matter what they do. Once a person realizes that the doctor cannot give them a 'quick pain fix,' they feel they will have the pain indefinitely. This prevents the person from finding ways of dealing with their pain and leads to feelings of helplessness.

- Sometimes people view their pain as some sort of unexplained mystery. The person's doctor can't fix it and the individual doesn't understand why the pain is happening or where it is coming from. As a result, people negatively evaluate their own ability to cope with their pain. This leads to passive coping--they hope and pray the pain will go away without trying to find a means to actively cope.

- Sometimes people will enter a pain management program expecting to have their pain eliminated. Unfortunately, while pain management programs provide a way for people to gain control over their pain, the pain cannot be eliminated. Even though the pain cannot be taken away, individuals can learn to coexist with their pain and to not let it consume them.

Whether a person chooses to deal with their chronic pain on their own or to seek help through individual counselling, pain management programs, or support groups, chronic pain does not just 'go away.' In an effort to gain control over pain, perhaps the initial step is to recognize that the pain you are feeling in your back or knees is, in part, controlled by what is in your head. That is NOT to say that the pain is in your head. However, there is a profound connection between the sensation of pain experienced in the body and the way our minds interpret these bodily sensations, and translate them into the aches and pains we feel. The mind, being the supreme power plant of the body, influences the impact the pain plays in our daily lives--in the work place, at home, or any other area of life. Changing the way we 'think' about pain can result in a decrease in the pain's negative effect on us. Pain need not control our lives; we must gain control over it. The best way to accomplish this is to enlist help by researching pain management in your bookstore, library, or the Internet, or by engaging the help of a pain management program or counsellor.

There are several suggestions for those who presently suffer with chronic pain and wish to be 'in control' of it.

- Understand and accept that there may be no 'cure' and that you will need to deal with the fact that you'll never be pain free. Learn as much as possible about pain and about your particular pain condition.

- Take an active role in your pain management. Follow your health care provider's advice. Find out what YOU can do to take a managerial role in dealing with your pain. Others cannot control your pain--YOU must be the one responsible for it.

- Look beyond your pain to the things that are important in your life. Make a list of the things you would like to do. Setting some priorities can help you find a starting point to getting back to a more active life.

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