

Chronic Pain and Mental Health

We have all heard of mental illness stigmatization. If someone is feeling too depressed to move out of bed, or another is too anxious to take a deep breath or sleep, they are told that the symptoms they are experiencing are “all in their head.” Those who do not understand how debilitating these illnesses can be sometimes suggest that people should just “walk it off” or “get over it already.” The unfortunate truth for many people is if an injury is not visible, it does not exist. While this viewpoint is often applied to individuals experiencing mental health issues, it is similarly applicable to those suffering from chronic pain, defined as any pain that lasts longer than six months.

Though pain is not visible or tangible, it is very real to the person experiencing it. In some cases, chronic pain is the result of a physical injury or health condition; in this case a doctor can more easily point out what is wrong and how to fix it. Oftentimes, however, chronic pain can develop due to a mental health condition, a somatic expression of an individual’s emotional suffering. Unfortunately, without a clear physical cause, the pain can be difficult to understand and treat, resulting in increased stress. This may lead to increased pain and have an additional negative affect on an individual’s mental and emotional wellbeing.

For some, chronic pain is caused by or may result in depression, anxiety, unexpressed anger, or unexplored overwhelming emotions. Though all of these possibilities may seem debilitating, there are various ways to manage the pain, thereby minimizing more mental and emotional suffering. One option involves physical activity. Some of chronic pain manifests in aching stiffness in muscles and joints, which hinders those experiencing the discomfort from being active. However, lack of movement only leads to muscles and joints losing more of their flexibility, causing more stiffness and pain. It is important to try low impact exercises such as walking, water-aerobics or beginner’s yoga so that the muscles and joints can regain their flexibility. In short, pain does not necessarily mean that individuals can no longer participate in activities they love. Simply knowing personal limits of

movement and committing to a routine of motion can help reduce some depression or negative emotions resulting from giving up beloved hobbies and interests.

In addition to managing physical symptoms of pain, individuals can minimize mental and emotional suffering by engaging in diversions. For instance, the negative thoughts, anger, depression or anxiety caused by chronic pain can be reduced when individuals look after their social connections. Spending time with loved ones has been shown to make those experiencing pain more resilient and emotionally stable. Socializing with friends and family also has the added benefit of acting as a distraction from the pain when it flares up. Delving into distractions like watching a movie, reading a book, or engaging in a hobby can be pleasant pastimes that help people cope with the pain they are experiencing.

There are many causes and many consequences of chronic pain, and as such, treatments for the condition can vary depending on the needs of each individual. Similar to mental health issues, the pain may be invisible, but is very real. Much like mental health conditions, no matter how debilitating the pain may seem, it is manageable, and sometimes treatable. With that in mind, it is important for people experiencing chronic pain and their treatment providers to always remember: Never lose hope.

References:

1. Managing chronic pain: How psychologists can help with pain management. (2013, December 1). Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/pain-management.aspx>
2. Chronic Pain: Symptoms, Diagnosis, & Treatment. (2011). *NIH Medline Plus*, 5-6.