

# Chronic Pain: What It Is & How to Cope

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# Agenda

## Learning Objectives

Differentiate Chronic Pain and Acute Pain

Explain at least 2 effects of Chronic Pain

List at least 3 Coping Strategies

# The Differences

## Acute Pain

- Less than 3 months
- Is a symptom
- Has an identified cause, usually body's response to injury
- Diminishes with healing and treatment

## Chronic Pain

- More than 3 months
- Is a condition
- May have no known cause, can develop after an incident
- Persists beyond expected healing time and despite treatment



# Some Statistics

# 50.2 Million Adults (20.5%)

Reported pain on most days or every day

Common Locations: Back, knee, hip, foot

24.4 Million (10%) suffer from high-impact chronic pain

(Yong, Mullins & Bhattacharyya, 2022 )

## 99% of those with pain

Stated that pain has restricted their routine activities

(U.S. Pain Foundation, 2022 Survey Report)

## 79% of those with pain

Said they felt stigmatized because of their pain

63% felt stigmatized by their providers



# Effects of Chronic Pain

# Biological Health

Physical health

Genetic vulnerabilities

Drug effects

# Mental Health

Anxiety and Depression

Self-esteem

Anger and Frustration

# Social Wellbeing

Relationships

Occupation

# Biological Health

- Difficulty with strength, flexibility, and endurance
- Sleep disturbance in 64% of those with chronic pain  
(Sleep Foundation, 2022)
- 70% of those with chronic pain are women  
(Harvard Health Publishing, 2017)



# Biological Health

- Long-term opioid use can result in hyperalgesia, muscle rigidity, sleep-disordered breathing, constipation, increased risk of bone fractures, overdose

(Cleveland Clinic, 2022)

- Prolonged pain results in systemic chemical brain changes & stress response

(Augusta Pain Center, 2019)


# Mental Health

- Those with chronic pain have 3x more likelihood to develop anxiety  
(Harvard Health, 2017)
- 35%-45% of those with chronic pain experience depression  
(Vadivelu, Nalini, et al., 2017)
- Heightened chance of guilt, shame, low self-worth

# Social Wellbeing

- Isolation or reduced participation in social activities
- Impaired interpersonal functioning
- Loss of social roles and identity (family, friends, occupation)

(Pain News Network, 2020)



# What Is Meaningful Pain Relief

# 33–50% decrease in pain intensity

Clinically meaningful from a patient perspective  
Represents a reasonable standard of treatment efficacy  
(Gordon et al., 2005)

## Same standard

Acute pain  
Chronic pain

## Functional improvement goals

Vary regardless of pain intensity reduction goals  
Essential for treatment and expectations across pain types

# Things to Keep in Mind

- Multidisciplinary approach might be needed -- medication, rehabilitation, therapy, etc.
- Pain relief might be main goal, but improved function and quality of life are important too
- Multiple mechanisms are at play and should be considered when conceptualizing



# Interventions for Chronic Pain

# Stress Management

Muscles tense or spasm when we experience stress

Prolonged rise in cortisol levels can result in further inflammation

(Hannibal & Bishop, 2014)



# Manage Stress: Relaxation Training

- Diaphragmatic Breathing
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation
- Mindful Meditation
- Visualization and Imagery
- Track impact of relaxing activities

# Cognitive Restructuring

Negative pain thoughts can result in maladaptive coping, exacerbation of pain,  
decreased use of strategies, increased overall suffering

Negative thoughts result in negative affect, leading to increased pain intensity

# Restructure Cognition: Counterthoughts & Positive Affirmations

- Identify unhelpful thoughts and reframe them
  - Catastrophizing
  - Polarized Thinking
  - "Should"-ing
  - Disqualifying the Positive
  - Jumping to conclusions
  - Overgeneralization
  - Emotional reasoning
- Identify personal strengths or positives about the situation

# Engaging in Activity

Appropriate boundaries and limits towards activities can help avoid both overactivity and under-activity when experiencing "good" or "bad" pain days

# Get Active: Appropriate Pacing

- Identify how long an activity is possible without a pain flair
  - Mild exercise
  - Distracting enjoyable activities
- Identify how long of a rest period is necessary to recover from the active period
- Watch out for:
  - Underactivity and over-guarding
  - Overactivity

# Reaching for Social Support

A resiliency factor that is associated with better adjustment to chronic pain  
Access to it can weaken or eliminate the negative effects of a perceived  
stressor on health and quality of life  
(Penn et al., 2019)

# Seek Support: Access & Communicate

- Instead of isolating, reach out to family, friends, and significant others
- Seek sources of emotional, tangible, and informational support
- Communicate needs and boundaries clearly to avoid over/under response

# Maintaining Sleep Hygiene

Poor sleep is an predictor of next day pain intensity

Opioids, antidepressants, and anti-anxiety medication can interfere with sleep patterns

Improved sleep can reduce need for pain medication

(Swedish Health Center)



# Sleep and Rest: Routines & Strategies

- Pre-bedtime routine
  - Warm bath, warm uncaffeinated drink, quiet time
- Keep a regular sleep/wake time
- 3-2-1 Technique
  - Sound, sensation, image
- Conduct a body scan
- Create a comfortable environment



# Treatment Considerations

# Treatment Variation

Not all those with chronic pain will respond effectively to CBT

Consider using DBT, ACT, Motivational Interviewing

# Consistency & Willingness

Treatment efficacy will be highly affected by an individual's willingness and/or ability to consistently follow through with their homework

# Things to Keep in Mind

- We must listen to what clients tell us & look out for verbal cues -- acknowledge the pain
- Perception, severity, and expression of pain will vary
- Asking the right questions and providing choices for pain management helps with realistic expectations and effective treatment



Thank you!!  
Questions?

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