



Pain Relief Foundation

Management of chronic pain – how can psychology help?

Dr Helen Poole, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Liverpool John Moore's University

Mrs Kate MacIver, Research Associate, Pain Research Institute, Liverpool

Psychologists are health professionals who specialise in studying thoughts, feelings and behaviour. How can this expertise be of help to someone with a chronic pain condition? After all, pain is a physical problem, isn't it? Well...yes and no.

The sensation of pain is physical, but how we respond to it is related to what we think about the pain, how we feel about it and what we do to manage it. For example, most people with chronic pain will recognise that they have good days and bad days. What is the difference? It may of course be related to the amount of activity you have been doing, but it may also be because of how you were thinking and feeling on each separate day. Perhaps on one day you were home alone, having told your friends you couldn't meet them for coffee, feeling isolated and miserable, thinking about the future and how you might cope, maybe feeling frustrated about pain preventing you from doing some of the things you used to enjoy. In the second case, you may have also been home alone, but engrossed in an activity that you enjoy, perhaps reading a book or playing with your grandchildren. These examples show how thoughts and feelings can seemingly 'increase' pain as you focus on it and its impact, as well as 'reduce' pain when your attention is directed away from it.

Another important factor is the effect longstanding pain can have on feelings and quality of life. It is quite common for people in pain to become depressed or anxious over time, and to miss out on life's daily pleasures. Psychologists can help people with chronic pain to learn to manage pain and improve their quality of life, without necessarily changing the pain itself.

Pain Management Programmes

Pain management programmes have been set up nationwide and offer psychological and physical support. (To find your nearest Pain Management programme, check out the Pain Society website at www.britishpainsociety.org for a full list).

Most Pain Management Programmes use a psychological technique called Cognitive Behavioural Therapy to treat people with chronic pain. This type of therapy works well for people with both physical and emotional difficulties, as it tackles how we think in relation to pain, how we feel about it, and last but not least, how we behave in relation to pain. For example, if someone has got into the habit of staying in bed on a bad day, they might benefit from getting up and taking a short walk instead, which will not only help to loosen stiff joints and muscles, but also give a sense of achievement, which may well help to build confidence and improve mood.

Components of the pain management programme

How long a programme runs for varies from centre to centre. At the Walton Centre there are two programmes based on group therapy, one for one day per week for 6 weeks, and one for four days per week for 4 weeks. Some people might not be able to cope with group therapy (although it does bring with it the great benefit of meeting other people in a similar situation) and may need one-to-one work with a psychologist, physiotherapist, nurse or occupational therapist.

Exercise

Mixing chronic pain and exercise can be difficult – how to know what exercise is safe, how much extra pain to expect or tolerate? Psychological strategies can help us learn to lose the fear of movement. They can also help us learn how to plan exercise and activities in such a way that too much extra pain is avoided. Exercise programmes are tailored to individual needs, and participants learn to monitor their own progress, so that they can continue to improve at home.

Relaxation

Some of us find that the best way to manage pain is be constantly on the move, making relaxing difficult. Learning to relax is good fun and helpful for everyone, pain or no pain. Relaxation exercises can help to reduce muscle stiffness and spasm, and be terrific in improving sleep.

In conclusion, psychologists are important members of the pain management team. His or her purpose is not to prove that someone's pain is "all in the mind." Rather, it is to help people in pain to build good coping skills so that they can enjoy a good quality of life despite their pain, and often reduce their pain by becoming fitter, happier and more active. Not everybody needs this type of pain management, but it's good to know it's there if we do.

Building a positive thinking style

Living with chronic pain is a difficult challenge. It may be that, as time goes on, sneaky negative thoughts start to take precedence – for example "I can't go out, it'll hurt too much," "This pain is so bad I can't cope," "If I try to go for a walk I'll be in agony." Participants on a Pain Management Programme learn to recognise this negative way of thinking and send it packing, replacing it with more balanced thoughts, such as "If I go out, it'll take my mind off the pain and I'll have a good time."

Making friends

For those who have become isolated and lonely because of pain, then going on a Pain Management Programme can be a first good step to rebuilding social contacts, as everyone is in the same boat, learning to cope together.

Goal setting and pacing

Psychological management of chronic pain is all about rebuilding a good quality of life and this may involve setting goals which are important to each individual, such as spending more time with family and friends, walking the dog, going back to work. These goals may be achieved by learning to pace activity, maybe learning to stop and take a break before the pain becomes unmanageable.

All the above components of pain management may have a beneficial effect on building self-confidence and reducing distress.