How Are Chronic Pain and Addiction Connected?

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Understanding the Link Between Chronic Pain and Addiction

The human body is an amazing creation. It can grow, heal, and adapt. If you get in a blazingly hot bath, your body can adjust to make the water feel more comfortable. When it's dark, your eyes can regulate to see more clearly.

The body does have limitations, though. When pain is chronic, it is challenging for the body to change and absorb the discomfort.

There are so many conditions that cause chronic pain. Whether it was a problem that began at birth or something that developed later in life, chronic pain is an everyday reality for many people.

The Impact of Pain

Chronic pain carries a long list of feelings with it. People who experience chronic pain often report feeling:

- Sadness
- Anger
- Anxiety and high stress
- Irritability
- Frustration
- Confusion
- Hopelessness
- A yearning for life without pain

All of these unwanted feelings translate into a sense of desperation.

When people are desperate, they will turn towards unhealthy measures to improve their circumstances, even if the benefits only last for a few minutes or a few hours. They will engage in actions they wouldn't do ordinarily because of their desire to feel better.

Substances of Concern

This is where substance use comes into the discussion. When people are in pain, they will look to substances to feel better.

For the purpose of this article, substances and substance use will have a broad definition to include many substances that change your body and/or your mind, like:

- **Illicit drugs.** Cocaine, heroin, hallucinogens, inhalants, and others.
- **Marijuana.** Though legal in some situations, this substance proves problematic for many.

- **Alcohol.**
- **Pain pills.** These medications are commonly opioids for chronic pain. Doctors prescribe these regularly, but they carry risk of addiction and dependency, even when used as prescribed.
- **Other prescription pills.** Other medications can be problematic, like benzodiazepines (Xanax, Ativan, Klonopin, and others). These medications reduce anxiety and irritability by slowing down the body and inducing relaxation.
- **Caffeine and sugar.** Though mild compared to the others, these substances can create concerns for people that consume too much of them.

People in pain are looking for relief, so they will experiment with substances to alleviate their symptoms.

Next page: how addiction becomes a negative coping skill.

Substances of Concern

Often, the process is subtle. Perhaps someone will take more of their pain medication once a month. Maybe they will drink a few more beers than usual during a weekend, or they find themselves indulging in more sweet treats.

Alone, none of these experiments is a significant problem, but people struggle to remain with moderation.

Substance Use: A Negative Coping Skill

Over time, substance use grows and develops. One more pill per month becomes two more pills per day. A few beers become many beers. A sweet treat becomes uncontrollable binges.

It rarely stays the same because it is linked to decreased ratings of pain. For these people, substance use becomes a negative coping skill.

Negative coping skills often disguise themselves as positive coping skills. Negative coping skills are behaviors that create drastic and immediate changes in your life. They will focus only on the short-term benefit of covering up or avoiding the pain, which creates problems because what’s easy in the short-term is rarely best in the long-term.

When people find a negative coping skill they prefer, its use tends to increase towards addiction and dependence, which always ends poorly.

If you become dependent on a substance like pain medication, your body will respond with increased pain and discomfort if the substance is not available at the desired level. At times, these withdrawal symptoms can lead to extreme discomfort and dangerous reactions.

Focus on the Positives

Fighting chronic pain must be done with positive coping skills. They provide fewer immediate results, but they will improve your life long-term. Positive coping skills for chronic pain include:

- Following doctor’s orders
- Consistently attending all appointments and showing honesty with your providers
- Increasing exercise for chronic pain (within your abilities)
- Spending more time with people you like, doing things you like
- Trying mental health treatment

If therapy is something you have never considered for your chronic pain, now might be the time. Since your pain is likely here to stay, changing your perceptions of the pain can do wonders to improve your life.

A therapist, especially one trained in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), can assist with this process. Additionally, they can help you find hope and optimism in the future by shifting your expectations.

Do not let your desperation for pain relief lure you to the false promises of substance use. This negative coping skill may seem to improve your status momentarily, but in actuality, it adds more problems than it solves.

Nothing worthwhile is easy, and treating your chronic pain is no exception. Take the challenging road of positive coping skills to results you can be proud of. The path to long-term success is the only path.