Breaking Down the Chronic Pain Cycle

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Untangling the Web

Dealing with chronic pain and the drugs you are using for pain treatment don’t work well enough? Let’s see why you get pain, how to understand it and how to break that chronic pain cycle.

The Pain Cycle

It’s a vicious cycle. Consider the following scenario:

Pain?Tense muscles?Stress?Frustration/Anger/Fear?Depression?Fatigue?Pain

You experience pain, and as a result, your muscles get tense and tight. Muscle tightness is often caused by stress. Stress may be the result of getting angry or experiencing fear of frustration. Fears and anger may have a deeper, underlying cause: depression. Depression is associated with fatigue, sleeping problems and fatigue can also aggravate the pain.

As you can see, the arrows go in both directions, as the following scenario is also possible: You feel fatigued, and this can trigger a depressed mood, which can lead to fear, anger and frustration. These emotions can easily cause stress, which can be felt in your muscles. Tight muscles will cause pain.

Why Do You Get Pain?

The pain signals are received by your nerves, which are distributed in the whole body. There are nerve endings in your joints, muscles and soft tissues. The nerves will send this information to the brain, which will process this information, and as a result, you will feel that pain. If you don’t get enough sleep, if you feel stressed or if you are dehydrated, you will experience pain differently.

Chronic Pain

You may experience chronic pain associated with various conditions (e.g., fibromyalgia, arthritis, after an injury, etc.). Chronic pain, by definition, lasts three months or more and can persist throughout the day or be intermittent. If the pain is caused by nerve injuries or malfunction, you may experience so-called neuropathic pain. Chronic pain is the result of sensitization, a process that makes your nervous system augment and distort the pain. As time passes, emotional and psychological problems occur, and the pain further aggravates.

Managing Chronic Pain

Since the brain plays a key role in perceiving pain, you can trick your brain into thinking differently using cognitive techniques such as distraction.

Distraction can be used if you need to do some activities that could cause pain (for example, climbing stairs). Rather than thinking about pain, keep your mind busy with other thoughts (you can sing or focus on something else), and the pain will be less.

Muscle relaxation

The less tense your muscles are, the less pain you will have. You can use stretching techniques, yoga or tai chi to relax your muscles and improve joint mobility. Cold and hot packs can also block the pain nerves to send signals to the brain and relax your muscles.

Cut Down on Stress

Besides yoga and tai chi, you can use deep breathing or visualization so the mind will become more relaxed and calm.

Exercise

If your body releases feel-good chemicals such as endorphins, serotonin, dopamine or oxytocin (as it happens when you work out), they will change your perception and dampen the pain signals from the body to the brain (these chemicals also have pain-killer qualities).