Chronic Pain and Exercise

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Exercise Pain Away

Daily activities have been so much harder to complete lately. Getting out of bed, preparing meals and taking out the trash all take more effort and, at times, you can barely muster the energy. Chronic pain has given you physical discomfort and taken away your energy, motivation and interest in doing things you used to enjoy. You feel depressed.

Your doctor, friends and family keep recommending exercise but this seems nearly impossible even though you know the benefits. You are certain that any attempt at exercise will end in increased pain and a new feeling of failure. The risk seems too great.

Thoughts First

Therapists, especially ones that use cognitive behavioral therapy, look at thoughts (cognitions), feelings and behaviors. For you, targeting your unhelpful thoughts is a great starting point. Here's how:

- **Believe in the benefits**. You have heard and read endlessly about the benefits of exercise. Maybe it is time to take a second look with more optimism. Research points to exercise reducing chronic pain, anxiety and depressive symptoms all while improving overall physical health and learning about the positive relationship between chronic pain and exercise. Exercise does amazing things.
- **Believe in your abilities**. You know that chronic pain increases depression and depression lowers self-esteem and confidence. Chances are great you are capable of more than you realize. Encourage yourself to gain a new sense of power and control while building hope for the future. If there is hope, there is opportunity for success.

Behaviors Second

If you wait until you feel ready to start, you never will. Even the best cognitive interventions will not fully prepare you. You must take action. Consider the following exercises:

- **Stretching** – Whether you do simple stretches learned in grade school or a complex series of progressive muscle relaxation, stretching will aid with flexibility, range of motion and loosen tight, painful muscles. Stretching will improve your performance in other exercises.
- **Aerobic** – These exercises provide your muscles with oxygen and nutrition. Think walking, biking and swimming and seek out low impact options like elliptical trainers. These exercises help with energy, stamina and reduce pain. The repetitive movements help induce meditative states that limit depression and anxiety. Aerobic exercises can be intense so work to find an appropriate balance. Start with lower intensity for lower durations and add along the way.
- **Weight training** – Lifting weights is not only for football players. Stronger muscles don't need to work as hard as weaker muscles which will leave you with more energy after a task is completed. Start with light

weights and lower repetitions.

- **Yoga** – Yoga helps build endurance and strength while improving sleep and concentration. Search for gentle yoga classes, videos or lists of poses online that seem possible for your level of pain. Tai chi is another option that provides similar benefits.
- **Housework** – No one likes running the vacuum or dusting the furniture but there is an aspect of exercise involved. Making these activities a priority will give you the physical benefit as well as the pride associated with maintaining a clean home.

Conclusion

If your doctor recommends exercise, don't ignore the suggestion. By addressing thoughts first and behaviors second, your feelings will begin to improve. Your self-esteem, confidence and motivation will allow you to expand your exercise routine to include increased intensity and duration. The more you acknowledge the positive relationship between chronic pain and exercise, the better you'll feel.