The Relationship Between Chronic Pain and Fatigue

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How to Cope With Chronic Pain and Fatigue

Fatigue is defined as the lack of energy, or lethargy of body and mind, possibly caused by sleep deficit. Fatigue has many effects on daily life. It has been proven to cause insufficient sleep, associated with cognitive problems, reduced job performance, reduced motivation, increased safety risks, and physiological changes. In this article, we will take a look at the connection between chronic pain and fatigue, and what you can do to remedy exhaustion.

Fatigue-related problems are also believed to cost the U.S. an estimated $18 billion dollars per year in lost productivity and accidents. More than 1,500 fatalities, 100,000 crashes, and 76,000 injuries annually are attributed to fatigue-related drowsiness on the highway.

Why Does Chronic Pain Make You Tired?

For people suffering from chronic pain, fatigue can be a natural result of their condition. It is simply exhausting to deal with an unpleasant feeling, like pain, for days on end.

Doctor appointments, medication, and worrying about the pain all take an emotional and physical toll on one's energy. Some people with non-apparent disabilities, such as chronic pain, if not fatigued by the disabilities themselves, can become tired by the constant effort required to pass as non-disabled.

Sometimes the pain does not go away when resting or laying down. It is difficult to get a good night's sleep or concentrate on relaxing if one is in pain or uncomfortable.

How Does a Lack of Sleep Affect Pain?

Sleep is important. The National Sleep Foundation details how crucial sleep is to our well-being and energy levels.

Sleep has been proposed to be a physiological adaptation to conserve energy; it restores energy to our bodies, helps clear waste from the brain, and can even clear out negative emotions from our thought process. There is a growing body of evidence that sleep duration is linked to metabolism and the regulation of appetite.

If someone with chronic pain manages to fall asleep, the pain can cause that person to wake up multiple times per night, resulting in low-quality sleep and a feeling of fatigue ensuing in an even more rapid depreciation of the body.

The fatigue a chronic pain sufferer endures can feed into the pain cycle and make one perceive the pain as even worse, making everyday tasks such as putting on clothes or getting out of bed very difficult. It can also lead to social alienation because you are simply not up for something that requires energy, such as going out or seeing

friends.

How to Deal With Chronic Pain and Fatigue

Living with chronic pain and fatigue can be a challenge, but there are a few ways that may help you overcome your tiredness and conserve energy. Below are some coping with chronic pain and fatigue strategies you can implement today.

The Spoon Theory

The spoon theory by Christine Donato explains why people with a chronic illness have reduced the amount of energy available for productive tasks.

“Spoons” are used as an intangible unit of measurement to track how much energy a person has every day. Each activity costs a certain amount of spoons and will not be replaced until the next day. Someone who runs out of spoons loses the ability to do anything other than rest.

Disabled or ill people must plan their activities to ensure that every day is manageable because their disability uses up a lot of their spoons. On the other hand, healthy people have a never-ending supply of spoons, thus never need to worry about running out.

Spoons can be replenished not only through sleep but also through exercise and nutrition, maintaining a sleep diary and regular schedule, relaxation therapy, as well as medicine and visiting your doctor.

Exercise and Nutrition

A proper nutrition and regular exercise program can at least help to increase one’s energy when dealing with chronic pain and fatigue.

Certain foods, such as raw fruits, egg whites, complex carbohydrates, yogurt, nuts, and lean meats are known to give a boost to one’s energy. Sugar, simple carbohydrates, and fried food are prone to making one feel lethargic and lacking energy.

Changing the frequency of your meals can also help to increase energy levels and it varies person to person. Some people achieve a boost with multiple small meals throughout the day, while others prefer the concept of three solid meals every day.

Some people turn to caffeine for that energy boost when fatigued but its effects wear off after a couple of hours, cause a slump afterward, and can interfere with the natural sleep cycle.

Exercise is also a great way to improve one’s energy levels. In a study published in the Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics journal in 2008, it found that inactive folks who normally complained of fatigue could increase energy up to 20% while decreasing fatigue by as much as 65% by participating in a routine, low-intensity exercise program.

One might think that exercising would tire a person out even more but it is quite the opposite. Aerobic exercise has been shown to spark the mitochondria in our body’s cells to produce more energy to meet the increased energy requirements created by exercise. Although it is probably difficult to exercise with chronic pain, one can still try a stationary bike, short walks outside, and water aerobic exercises.

Maintaining a Sleep Diary and Regular Schedule

Having a regular time to wake up each morning and go to bed each night can help with sleep and overall energy levels. Regular sleep events can help strengthen circadian rhythms and leads to regular times of sleep onset.

Writing down how you slept each night and factors that could have interrupted with your sleep can help analyze what leads to sleep problems.

Relaxation Therapies

Relaxation techniques can help ease one’s mind and not have them so focused on the pain.

Focused breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, guided imagery, autogenic training, and meditation are all ways to relax, reduce stress, and decrease fatigue.

Fitting relaxation therapies into a daily schedule can help increase results in both body and mind.

Medicine and Visiting Your Doctor

If none of the previous alternative methods mentioned are helping, then it could be time to have a discussion with your doctor about taking supplements or medication for sleep.

There are several natural sleep aids, such as tryptophan, melatonin, and various herbs that are available at most retail locations. Newer medications in the market are available that don’t have as many side effects as previous sleeping pills.

Open communication with your doctor about fatigue and chronic pain can lead to a proper remedy for these problems.

What's Next for Chronic Pain and Fatigue?

Fatigue and chronic pain are often linked because of many possible reasons. The pain can be exhausting to simply deal with every day, can interfere with one’s sleep, and cause one to run out of daily spoons, as Donato’s spoon theory suggests.

The lack of energy can have many possible consequences; it can feed into the pain cycle and make the pain worse, cause irritability, decreased motivation, and a higher risk for accidents.

Fortunately, there are a couple of ways to combat the fatigue that may be associated with chronic pain:

- A nutrition and low-intensity exercise program can help regulate schedules.
- Various relaxation therapies can aid in relaxing both body and mind to steer focus away from chronic pain.
- Maintaining and documenting a regular sleep schedule can naturally increase energy levels and decrease fatigue.
- Natural and pharmacologic sleep aids are also options after consulting with a doctor.

Fatigue may be hard enough to deal with, but the methods described above are just a few ways to help combat the lack of energy associated with chronic pain.