Coping With a Lack of Understanding

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How to Cope With a Lack of Understanding About Chronic Pain

Chronic pain is difficult to live with. Many people who suffer from chronic pain require a strong support system to help them through the tough times. However, one of the biggest problems people with chronic pain face, is the lack of understanding society has towards this condition. Unfortunately, it is difficult for many people to understand and wrap their heads around how hard it can be to live with chronic pain. The people who lack understanding can come in the form of family, friends, significant others, strangers, and even doctors. The reactions of other people, who might lack an understanding of chronic pain and suggest that you are faking the pain to avoid work or family responsibilities, can be distressful. Chronic pain sufferers need the understanding and support of others, but they may seem unsympathetic or even hostile.

You may ask, “Why is it hard for others to recognize the severity of chronic pain?” There are three answers to that: the ‘no shock’ factor, lack of sympathy, and lack of knowledge.

'No Shock' Factor

The ‘no shock’ factor is a pretty simple concept. Unlike other diseases, such as cancer or ALS, there is not much shock factor with chronic pain. Your hair doesn’t fall out, your skin isn’t peeling off, and you don’t lose control of your muscles. No one can tell by looking at you on the surface that you have a medical deficit. On top of that, chances are the pain isn’t going to put your life at risk, so a lot of people chalk it up as something you’ll have to deal with. Because there is no “shock factor,” people will assume that chronic pain is not really a big deal.

Lack of Sympathy

In addition to the ‘no shock’ factor, there could be a lack of sympathy. Unfortunately, there is a firm stigma behind chronic pain and some people were taught to believe that pain is a fleeting emotion, like fear, that can be overcome with sheer force and will. Our society lauds athletes who play through pain, and gym rats will wear “No Pain, No Gain” t-shirts proudly. On top of that, the severity of chronic pain can vary on a day-to-day basis. It is difficult for people, especially workplaces and other institutions, to understand how you can be fine one day and unable to move the next.

Lacking in Knowledge

Besides lacking sympathy, there is the possibility of people lacking in knowledge. There aren’t many 5k walks or ice bucket challenges to end chronic pain. Chronic pain is not an attractive subject, so the general awareness about it is low. Some people simply don’t understand how serious chronic pain can be, what causes it, how it can vary person to person, and how it can affect your life. Whether that be a young child or someone who has no previous experience with chronic pain. Thus, many people don’t know how to react when they hear you are in constant pain. Similarly, chronic pain is hard to treat and diagnose properly, causing frustration among doctors.

The fact that people don’t understand chronic pain can be disheartening and lead to distrust. Chronic pain sufferers need those that are close to them to be their support and a shoulder to lean on when they are struggling. Most of us expect our friends and family to understand and support us when we are struggling. Nothing hurts more than to have someone you value dismiss your pain, treat it with skepticism, and even resentment. Having individuals around you not understand chronic pain can lead to a general mistrust and pessimism toward people. A lot of chronic pain sufferers will withdraw from socializing because they would rather avoid human interaction than experience negative reactions to their pain. Some pain sufferers try to even hide the pain because they fear the reactions of those around them. The lack of understanding can make a chronic pain sufferer feel they are alone in their struggle, and there is nothing worse than that.

Despite all of this, there are ways to overcome a lack of understanding through a doctor or professional opinion, open communication, and learning to increase your own coping skills.

Doctor or Professional Opinion

Although there is a long way to go, the general awareness in our society towards chronic pain has increased in the past couple of decades. Doctors are becoming more aware of the legitimacy of chronic pain, the seriousness of the disease, and how to treat it. Sometimes it takes the opinion or voice of a professional for others to understand the severity of chronic pain. You can have a doctor write a note or bring that person with you to see the professional. Having the professional aptly describe and validate your pain can help family or friends legitimize and understand chronic pain better.

Open Communication

Keeping an open communication with your close ones and colleagues can help to increase the understanding of chronic pain. There is a fine line of reminding your loved ones of your limitations and complaining endlessly. Making it clear what you can and can’t do because of the pain will help your close ones get accustomed to your lifestyle. Also, educating them on what is going on your body to cause the pain can help them understand how serious the condition actually is. If the support system you are counting on for help doesn’t understand or respect severity of the pain no matter how many times you remind them, it may be time to reevaluate that support system.

Learn to Increase Your Own Coping Skills

Ultimately, chronic pain sufferers should learn the tools to be better prepared for the occasional disappointment, lack of understanding, and resentment that other people may have towards the disease. It is a fact of life that not everyone, no matter how educated they are, will care to help or understand what another person is experiencing. You can’t control the way other people act but you can control your reaction to them. Learn to not take it so hard when doctors or friends question the validity of how you feel. It is a very unpleasant experience to come in contact with someone who does not understand or believe you, but there are people out there who care and will try to help you.

Conclusion

The severity of chronic pain can be magnified when those around you lack an understanding of the condition. A lack of understanding can be caused by a variety of reasons; chronic pain doesn’t have the shock factor of other diseases, some people lack sympathy, and others just aren’t aware of the severity of it. The lack of understanding to a person’s pain can be devastating and can lead to a general mistrust in others. There are a couple of methods to combat and cope with the lack of understanding others may have about chronic pain. These methods include having a professional explain the pain verbally or on paper, keep open communication with those around you about the pain, and develop the tools to cope with an adverse reaction. The lack of understanding others may have is hard to prevent, but there are ways of overcoming such a deficiency, and it all starts with both parties making that first step.