

Chronic and Recurrent Pain: A Holistic Approach

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When a disease has more than one treatment or explanation, it usually reflects a lack of understanding of its true nature. No condition in medicine shows this characteristic more than that of pain.

Before the discovery of bacteria in the late 1800's, there were all sorts of theories and treatments for the various manifestations of bacterial illness. Back then, pneumonia was thought of as a different disease than a skin infection. The discovery of bacteria was powerful due to its clarity and elegance. It allowed us to understand many seemingly different illnesses from a simple perspective. Even recently, when a physician proposed that stomach ulcers were caused by bacteria, the medical establishment poo-poo-ed the theory until the facts became un-repressible. Before that time, people were getting hosts of drugs and surgeries, often with limited success.

Chronic and recurrent pain is as invisible as bacteria were 100 years ago. Science found a way to see and quantify bacteria objectively, but pain, due to its very nature, is subjective and very difficult to measurable.

Early in my career as a physiatrist (physician specializing in Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation), I was trained to treat pain with a combination of modalities (heat, cold, ultrasound), therapies (exercises, manipulation, braces and orthotics), and when all else failed, to resort to medical procedures such as injections and surgeries. However, many patients did not achieve adequate healing, or had their pains recur months or years later, either in the same location or a different location.

Sharing my patients' frustration and desire for healing, coupled with my own medical problems (such as Carpal Tunnel Syndrome, which I will discuss in a future article), I began to utilize techniques that I had learned outside of medicine--those of yoga, Feldenkrais, dance and mind-body phenomena such as hypnosis. The positive results were faster and greater than I ever expected. I later added additional holistic approaches such as acupuncture and nutrition to further enhance the healing.

What is "Chronic Pain"?

Pain is chronic, by definition, when it exists for more than six months. After this period of time, there are several biochemical, hormonal, neuropsychological and musculo-skeletal changes that occur that alter the ability to respond to conventional modalities. These changes affect sleep, mood, muscle, and the quality of the pain itself.

Medical science distinguishes "pain", the sensory

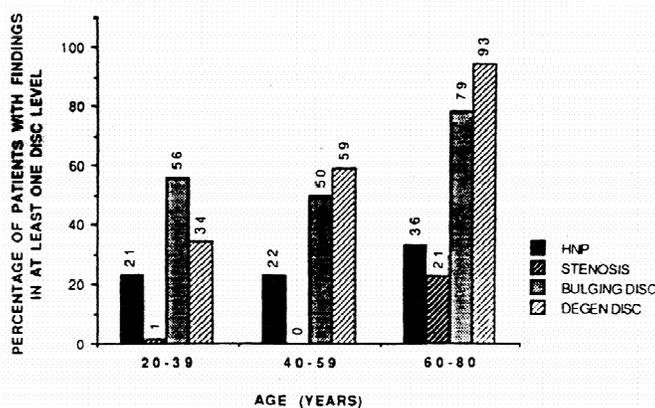
experience, from "suffering", which is the emotional component of pain. Certain "pains", such as those from a deep massage, may not cause suffering, while others, such as a light punch by a sibling, may cause lots of suffering, due to the context and sense of control over the pain.

What is the Cause of Chronic Pain?

- confusion of structural for functional diagnosis
- misinformation
- lack of consistency in following a treatment plan
- limitations of the Western model for pain
- lack of recognition that pain is a "mind-body" phenomenon which requires a whole-person approach
- "disuse syndrome" = weakness, inflexibility, strain
- dysfunctional muscle patterns that may be decades old
- feelings of anger and betrayal at those involved

Abnormal Magnetic-Resonance Scans of the Lumbar Spine in Asymptomatic Subjects

A PROSPECTIVE INVESTIGATION*
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Limitations of Xray, MRI and other structural tests

Most of the population over the age of 20 show structural changes on Xray or MRI; however these do not correlate with pain in the vast majority of people. One can have a horrible looking MRI and never have pain, or have a beautiful MRI and have severe, disabling pain. A herniated or bulging disc in your mind, caused by misinterpreting an MRI, is more painful and more difficult to heal than a "surgical" herniated disc, which occurs very rarely.

A New Philosophy of Chronic Pain

Pain

This new philosophy recognizes that we are multi-dimensional beings, and that pain is a function of imbalance. The dimensions, or layers, that are involved in chronic pain include the mechanical, biochemical, neurological ("programs" of the body), emotional (affects muscle tension, hormones, sleep), cognitive (belief systems: as we think, so we do), social (how we are socialized to accept and reject certain ideas, such as "arthritis is an inevitable fact of aging"), and first and last, energy and spirit (we know from quantum physics that everything is made of energy; solid object are more space that structure; spirit/consciousness is a special form of energy; energy can influence all the prior layers through practices that include acupuncture, yoga and body work).

Pain has evolved over millions of years to provide critical information for health and survival. Only in recent times is pain considered an "enemy" to be treated with "pain-killers". In this approach, we utilize pain to give us important clues to healing.

Implementation

While this approach seems complicated, the implementation is amazingly simple and elegant, which speaks to its power. The treatment is a combination of education, yoga, acupuncture, nutrition and body work. These various approaches work on all the layers discussed above, and can cause a profound, root-cause level of healing. They do need to be coordinated by a holistic practitioner, who is able to bring together the art and science of healing; who is comfortable working in both the subjective and objective worlds; who is willing to talk with you about the realms of emotion, belief and spirit. This approach requires that the "patient" take a very active role in their healing.

Before treatment begins, there should be a thorough medical evaluation, often including diagnostic tests, to rule out hidden or reversible conditions that present with pain. Then, based upon the patients' whole picture, a customized plan is developed. The ultimate goals are to use minimum medications and to optimize lifestyle.

Anecdotal vs True Evidence

When an individual heals using an "alternative" modality, such healing is often devalued, called "anecdotal", a fancy word for "random" or "fluke". Modern medicine is based on population-based research, where two groups are compared. However, such a research model doesn't allow for individual difference. For example, testing a supplement's effect of cancer in two groups of 100 people, if 5 people in the treatment group have a remission and 3 people in the "control" group (the group receiving a placebo), have a remission, such a difference will not be "statistically significant" and therefore the supplement will be deemed to be ineffective. However, for the two extra people in the treatment group, having a remission is significant, and may be due to their unique characteristics, or other uncontrolled factors that enabled the intervention to work better. Such differences get swallowed up in group studies.

There is another valid method of study called "Single Case Research", in which a person is compared to him/herself. Such a design is called ABAB, where A represents control and B represents a treatment. If someone doesn't do well with A, gets better with B, and then gets worse when returning to A, then we know scientifically that B is helping. This is the basis for "trial and error".

With modalities such as yoga, acupuncture, nutrition and body work, people often serve as their own controls. While the effects are subtle, and may take a few months to take hold, they are often effective. One day the patient wakes up and realizes that the pain is much better. Due to human nature, and the subtlety of these modalities, they may stop going to yoga, taking their supplements, or going for their acupuncture/body work. A few months later, they wake up, realizing that their pain has recurred. They resume their approach and they feel better again. This is the ABAB design in action.

Other Benefits

There are several other benefits to this holistic approach. The first is that the toxicity and side-effect profile are almost negligible when properly utilized. One can no longer say this about modern drugs, for which we have only begun to hear about the growing list of serious illnesses, short- and long-term, that they cause.

In addition, in the big picture, they are cheaper than drugs and surgery. While it seems that drugs are cheaper, this is only because of the huge amount we are all paying for "health insurance". In the near future, when we will be paying for drugs out of "Health Savings Accounts" or HSA's, the real cost of these drugs and procedures will become apparent; and the value of holistic modalities will be clear.

Another important aspect of the holistic approach is that it prevents recurrence, and also will promote healing of the whole body. So, while you think you are treating one condition, you are actually treating all conditions, both known and hidden.

Using this holistic, multi-dimensional approach, I have had the pleasure to participate in the healing of hundreds of patients. With each case, the path is not a straight line, but the trend is steadily upward. Each time someone gets better, we share the pleasant surprise that such a simple approach can work--but it does! We have only begun to understand the amazing healing powers of the body.

IMPORTANT NOTE: This general information should not be used to make decisions about medical care without the involvement of a knowledgeable practitioner.

Footnotes and Reading Materials (Books followed by ISBN number)

- 1 See Dr. Cheikin's website, www.cheikin.com, for related articles as well as other information.
- 2 Cheikin, Michael: Fibromyalgia and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome: A Nine-Step Pathway to Healing.
- 3 Campbell, TC & Campbell TM: The China Study: The Most Comprehensive Study of Nutrition Ever Conducted... Benbella Books, 2005. 1932-100-385.
- 4 Joy, W. Brugh: Joy's Way. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1979. 0874-770-858.
- 5 Cameron, Julia: The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity. Penguin, 1992. 0874-776-945.
- 6 Sivananda Center: The Sivananda Companion to Yoga. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983. 0684-87000-2.
- 7 Lasater, Judith P.T. Ph.D.: Relax and Renew: Restful Yoga for Stressful Times. Rodmell Press, 1995. 0962-713-848.

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