

LIVING WITH CHRONIC PAIN
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It is estimated that one in three adults suffers from some form of chronic pain. Chronic pain is defined as persistent or recurrent pain that continues beyond the usual recovery period for an injury or illness, or that goes on for years due to a chronic condition, like fibromyalgia.

Unlike acute pain, which is useful in warning us that we have an injury, chronic pain may not really serve any useful purpose, and may not even have a direct relationship to bodily injury (researchers at the University of Washington School of Medicine found that “the link between the source of the pain and the pain itself actually becomes weaker as chronic pain progresses. . . the pain begins to acquire a life of its own.”)

When there isn't an obvious connection between injury and pain, some doctors and well-meaning family members may suggest, or you yourself may wonder, “is it all in my head?” In fact, pain is not a physical sense, like sight, smell or hearing – it's an emotion (the opposite of another emotion: pleasure). People sometimes confuse what is psychological or emotional with what is imaginary, but there is nothing imaginary about chronic pain!

However, it may be difficult for others to understand how much pain you're in, or how it affects your life. Living with chronic pain can cause the loss of things that most of us take for granted, like the ability to move freely and easily, or the ability to get up and go to work every day, or the ability to take care of loved ones – and these losses can lead to depression. It's a vicious cycle, because the chemicals that are released in the brain during some forms of depression are also transmitters of pain messages, causing a depressed person to feel more pain.

This is why anti-depressant drugs are often prescribed for chronic pain in addition to painkillers. One of the problems of pain is that it produces a dependency on doctors and drugs – and yet traditional medical approaches are often ineffective, and prolonged use of addictive painkiller drugs suppresses the body's natural ability to inhibit pain through endorphin production.

Exercise is one of the most powerful weapons in the fight against pain – it increases production of endorphins, and strengthens muscles that stabilize the spine, which may reduce the number of pain signals sent to the brain. Having a positive mental outlook also makes a huge difference.

People who suffer most from chronic pain are those who hand the problem over to their doctor and settle for the painkiller-and-rest approach. Those who suffer least are those who exercise regularly, make an effort to change their outlook, and learn to put their pain in perspective.

Most health professionals today recognize that chronic pain functions as, and should be treated as, a separate condition, apart from the illness or injury that may have initially caused it. And pain management is a growing medical specialty, with a multidisciplinary treatment approach that may include acupuncture, yoga, teaching relaxation techniques, and changing diet.

To find a pain management doctor or clinic, go to the American Academy of Pain Medicine's website: www.painmed.org. For more information on living with and managing chronic pain, go to www.theacpa.org , the website for the American Chronic Pain Association, or contact me.