

The Impact of Chronic Pain

Did you know that more than 45% of Americans experience pain on a regular basis? Are you one of them? Unfortunately, people tend to fall into bad habits as the body adapts to, and becomes familiar with, persistent pain (Duhigg 2012).

Learn what you can do mentally to better handle chronic pain. Justin Price, MA, the San Diego–based creator of The BioMechanics Method®, has trained thousands of fitness professionals in his corrective exercise methods. Here he shares his insights into this topic.

The Mental Bad Habits of Pain

Many people faced with the day-in, day-out experience of chronic pain create negative “coping” habits that actually make their conditions worse (Thernstrom 2010). When chronic pain spikes, it often cues sufferers to engage in behaviors that, although dysfunctional, provide a short-term reward. For example, emotions such as anger and depression distract the brain (as it processes those thoughts and emotions), temporarily overriding the sensations of pain (Thernstrom 2010). These routine habits provide fleeting relief, but they also prolong chronic pain conditions by changing brain chemistry and altering the mind and body’s response to pain (Thernstrom 2010).

How These Mental Habits Affect the Body

These negative emotional responses cause negative *physical* changes as well. Because the body perceives persistent pain as a threat, the fight-or-flight response is triggered, and the instinct is to adopt protective postures and positions (Hanna 1988). Imagine an animal in pain; it curls up to shield its body and internal organs from further harm.

Human beings display the same defensive mechanisms by rounding the spine and shoulders and bringing the arms across the body in protection. They stick their head forward and clench their teeth to ward off potential stressful interactions with others. The lower body responds by tilting the pelvis downward and bringing the knees together to protect the genitalia (Hanna 1988). These changes, if repeated time and time again, can make chronic pain worse, causing joint inflammation, disease and degeneration.

The Importance of Rest and Recovery

So what *can* you do to help with chronic pain? This pain is usually a signal that the body (along with the mind) has been taxed beyond normal limits. This can be a result of chronic stress, chronic fatigue, disease, or chronic muscle and joint pain, among other things.

Whatever the cause, your system needs rest and recovery. Daily breathing techniques and meditation can help the mind and body relax by generating physiological changes that promote cell regrowth and repair (Thernstrom 2010).

Developing habits to promote relaxation before sleep is something else you can do. Strategies like consuming destressing herbal teas, turning off the television at least an hour before bed and taking a warm bath can all foster relaxation, rest and a proper night's sleep.

Appropriate nutrition will also contribute to rest and recovery. A licensed nutritionist or registered dietitian can help you to make suitable food choices for your condition. Massage and bodywork are other great strategies to relieve muscle tension and foster relaxation in the short-term; they will provide long-term benefits when integrated into regular workouts as part of a gentle self-myofascial-release program (Price 2013; Rolf 1989).

Change Your Mental Habits

Don't repeatedly focus on the activities you *can't* do right now and worry that you'll never ever be able to do them again. Cope with the situation in a healthier manner by identifying a positive mental reaction you can use in the future. For example, focus on fun activities you can do with friends. Try to narrow your attention to one step that you are making right now to get better, rather than always considering the worst-case scenario.

References

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