

COPING WITH CHRONIC PAIN

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In my last article I wrote about a physiological mechanism to explain chronic pain. Here I am writing about coping with chronic pain, and remember this means pain that is not fully explained by the pathology but exists anyway, and has lasted longer than 6 weeks

Asking for a cure for chronic pain is like asking for a cure for cancer. A cure doesn't exist. Sufferers continually search, often at great expense, for a cure for chronic pain. That is for someone else to take control and give them a pill or manipulate their joints in a special way or even to operate to cure them. These may afford some or even moderate relief for the short term, but chronic pain returns.

If a patient uses a T.E.N.S or T.E.M.S patch or has their back manipulated/mobilised or has acupuncture to reduce their pain to allow a more normal lifestyle and some form of exercise, then this can be worthwhile. As long as they are aware these are not cures but coping devices. The patient can become dependent on such devices which can inhibit them finally overcoming the problem.

Pain control clinics have been set up in most capital cities with the aim of teaching patients how to cope with chronic pain. These centres have common ingredients which involve:

- i) Relaxation training- true relaxation often does not come naturally but must be learned.
- ii) A graduated exercise program- the correct exercise can become a tool for pain relief.
- iii) Education about chronic pain- e.g. on anatomy, physiology of pain and about back care and ergonomics.
- iv) Cognitive behavioural therapy- the mind has incredible powers to heal and techniques to block out pain can be learned.
- v) The patient is encouraged to start living and not wait for the pain to go first. (Importantly, acute pain is a warning and alarm, with chronic pain this can be a false alarm. The pain limits can be pushed carefully without fear of causing damage if given the right advise.) - The patient is taught that rest does not cure chronic pain, hurt is not always harm with chronic pain.

vi) Join a chronic pain support group such as the P.I.P.S group on the Sunshine Coast.

Overall, they aim for a gradual shift from outer resources (medication, manipulation, TENS, acupuncture etc.) to inner resources (relaxation, exercise, attitudinal change, behavioural techniques)