Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Less Pain, More Gain: Addressing Chronic Pain

Think of all the things you do during the day: getting up, heading to work, making dinner, going out with friends, etc. Now imagine what it would be like if you had to accomplish each of these tasks with a stinging pain in your back or neck. Or if walking a couple of feet made your knees burn.

For people with chronic back, neck or joint pain, this is an everyday reality and can stop them from functioning normally and doing the things they enjoy. Fortunately, there are many options available for chronic pain sufferers, like yourself, and a chance for you to get relief from your often debilitating symptoms.

Causes of Chronic Joint Pain

Everyone gets pain in their joints or back at some time in their lives. Usually it results from a sickness or accident, and disappears once the original problem is taken care of. Some people, however, continue to deal with severe joint or back pain for years afterward. Others suffer from chronic pain as the result of depression or a psychological condition.

While there are many unanswered questions about chronic pain, scientists believe the disorder results from the way the brain receives messages from the nervous system. Usually the messages we get are in direct response to our physical state. But chronic pain sufferers get a somewhat different message. Even in situations where there is no physical danger, their nervous system sends information signalling there's a problem, resulting in a long-lasting feeling of pain.

Preventing and Reducing Chronic Pain

Years ago, if you went into a doctor's office with chronic pain you'd probably leave with a prescription for painkillers. But today, most experts recommend a range of physical activities to help reduce symptoms of the condition and improve mobility. Such activities may include:

Physical exercise. Many health professionals consider physical exercise the best treatment for those with chronic pain. For most patients, the improvement is gradual, with the majority noticing a significant improvement after about 20 weeks of training. Regular physical exercise has also been shown to lessen the symptoms of mild to moderate depression, and releases endorphins in the brain that are thought to act as natural "painkillers." Always be sure to discuss options and side effects thoroughly with a qualified professional before beginning any exercise program.

Yoga. Scientific studies have confirmed that back pain sufferers who do yoga for a 26-week period experience a significant decrease in their symptoms and an increase in mobility compared to those who do conventional stretching exercises. This is especially true for a therapeutic type of yoga called Viniyoga, which contains less difficult stretches than other forms. Yoga is also a great form of exercise and provides the same mental boost as other physical activities.

Medication. Over-the-counter and/or prescription medication are sometimes necessary for sufferers with extreme pain who don't find sufficient relief from other methods of treatment. While effective in the short term, some painkillers are highly addictive and often come with side effects. Always be sure to discuss options and side effects thoroughly with a qualified professional before beginning any new medication.

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Surgery. In extreme cases, this can be successful in treating chronic pain. Replacement surgery, for example, may benefit those with severe joint problems.

Easing Mind and Body

For most sufferers, chronic pain can be affected by some types of psychological states or illnesses, such as depression or anxiety. Addressing these problems can help those afflicted with chronic pain to reduce and control their symptoms.

Consider the following suggestions to put yourself at ease:

Relaxation techniques. Among the most important treatment methods, basic relaxation techniques are the simplest and can be done almost anywhere. This includes deep breathing, which involves taking long breaths through the nose and releasing them through the mouth. Another technique is progressive relaxation, which is done by tensing all your muscles and releasing them slowly. Practicing imagery—closing your eyes and imagining being in a safe, peaceful place, for example—can also be effective.

Therapy. Because chronic pain is generally worsened by a psychological condition like anxiety or depression, psychological treatment can play an important part in treating the illness. This can mean psychotherapy or cognitive behavioral therapy, where trained psychologists work with the patient to find the psychological behaviors that trigger an attack.

Alternative medicines. Many sufferers also find relief in treatments such as biofeedback, hypnotherapy and reflexology.

Anti-depressants. The link between depression and chronic pain is very strong, and creates a downward spiral for many sufferers. Depression can trigger an attack of chronic pain, and likewise, the pain can cause depression in many patients. To help break this cycle, health professionals will sometimes recommend anti-depressant medication.

Living with chronic pain is never easy, but a range of treatment options are available to address the body and the mind. Recognition of this vital connection means today's chronic pain sufferers have a greater chance than ever of living happy, productive lives. Be sure to consult with your doctor before beginning any form of self-treatment.