

Psychology In Pain Management

The philosophy of treatment focuses on helping patients to take responsibility for their pain and helping them to cope with it using a variety of strategies. Many factors such as personality types, culture, and the meaning and the circumstances of the pain interact to produce the overall chronic pain experience.

The aim of psychological management is one of changing the patient's perception, so that rather than considering themselves to be suffering from chronic pain, they consider themselves to be well and coping, therefore taking responsibility for the maintenance of their own health. The Clinical Psychologist team is integral part of the multi-professional team helping patients develop their individual coping strategies, on a one to one or group basis.

Emotionally distressed patients tend to focus on negative events and stressors in their life, including their pain. This can exacerbate their experience of pain causing a stress-pain cycle. Negative thoughts and emotional distress can lead to increased muscle tension, with greater pain levels and further distress reinforcing the stress-pain cycle.

Cognitive-behavioural strategies have emerged as effective non-pharmacological interventions for the management of different types of pain. These strategies range in complexity from simple distraction, music therapy, relaxation and guided imagery to hypnosis.

Distraction

This is about taking patients' minds off their pain. Distraction is used to focus their attention on a stimulus, other than their pain. There are three types of distraction.

- **Imaginative inattention** – a strategy where patients imagine doing something pleasant such as walking, going on a family outing, or floating on water.
- **Mental distraction** – where a person carries out some mental activity such as counting, reciting a poem or praying.
- **Behavioural distraction** – the person actually does something that they find pleasant such as watching TV, stroking an animal, reading a book, smelling an essential oil or talking with friends.

Music Therapy

Music has been used with great success to switch patients' attention away from their pain. The most effective type of music at decreasing anxiety and inducing relaxation is music with a slow steady rhythm and low frequency tones. Music has been shown to be effective at ameliorating pain across a number of settings including postoperative, oncology, coronary care and during childbirth. We often use music therapy during acupuncture treatments to aid the patients' relaxation throughout the session.

Focusing

Focusing consists of a number of cognitive coping techniques that are very different from those used in distraction. A patient imagines the pain as something that can be controlled, for example viewing the pain as heat radiating from an oven and then imagining that turning the oven off can control it.

Reframing

Essentially the patient is taught to replace negative thoughts and beliefs with more positive ones. This approach is particularly useful for patients with chronic pain who experience feelings of helplessness and have a tendency to personalise and dramatize negative life events.

Relaxation

There is evidence, which demonstrates the relationship between pain, muscle tension and anxiety. If patients are instructed how to use relaxation exercises their pain levels can be reduced. Some relaxation techniques are very brief and simple to use, for example yawning or deep breathing exercises. Patients can focus their attention in a systematic manner to gain a sensation of warmth in various parts of their body, for example, the thought of lying on a beach with the sun on your face. Progressive muscle relaxation is a process of systematically focusing on various muscle groups, tensing then relaxing each group in a stepwise fashion.

Guided Imagery

This is a technique that involves using one's own mind to create a mental image, which distracts attention away from the pain experience. Patients are encouraged to imagine they are somewhere pleasant, for example walking barefoot in a forest; they can feel the coolness of the floor, hear the leaves rustling in the breeze, smell the wild flowers and see the beauty all around them. Relaxation exercises are often used in conjunction with guided imagery to enhance the overall effect.

