

How Listening to Your Pain Will Help You Heal

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Whether the pain is physical or psychological, the ads on the TV tell us that all we need to do is take a pill or go for a procedure and the pain will go away. In fact, pain itself, and making it go away is a huge part of the American economy. So what is wrong with this approach to pain? Well, first of all, these sorts of treatment are "symptomatic", i.e. they relieve the symptoms, but rarely get to the root cause. Also, by their passive nature, not requiring much involvement on the part of the person with the pain, they do not foster understanding or independence, and lastly, and importantly, they can cause other problems, such as toxicity, side effects, and scarring.

There is another approach that can reliably and durably get rid of pain—that is by actively listening to it. But what does "actively listen" mean? A look at our use of language provides a clue. When we refer to our major sensory systems—visual, auditory and tactile—we have two words that we use for each. One word suggests passive involvement, the other a focused engagement of consciousness. For example, with regard to the visual system, we can passively see or we can actively look. For the auditory system, we can passively hear or actively listen. With tactile sensation, we can touch or we can actively feel. The term "actively listening" with respect to pain uses a metaphor to reflect an engagement of consciousness in the process.

Pain has evolved over millions of years to provide critical information for health and survival. Only in recent times is pain considered an "enemy" to be treated with "pain-killers". Since the body does not communicate with words, pain is one of the only mechanisms it has for signaling that something is wrong. Like the red light on the dashboard of the car, when it lights up, we don't just cover it up—we take the car for help. Likewise, when the body or mind talks to our spirit using pain, paying attention often yields a solution. It applies to both physical pain (which often has a psychological component) and chronic psychological pain (such as anxiety, depression or panic). Instead of looking for a magical cure, we embark upon a healing journey.

What is "Chronic Pain"?

Medical science distinguishes "pain", which is a

sensory experience, from "suffering", which is the emotional component of pain. Certain "pains", such as a deep massage, may not cause suffering, while others, such as a light punch by a sibling, may cause lots of suffering, due to the context and sense of control over the pain. Pain is chronic, by definition, when it exists for more than six months. After this period of time, there are several neurochemical, neuropsychological and musculoskeletal changes that occur that alter your ability to respond to conventional modalities. Such physiological changes alter mood, sleep, hormone levels and the quality of the pain itself.

Sensations and emotions such as pain and suffering are functions of the mind. This is best exemplified by amputees who continue to experience phantom sensations/pain in "limbs" that have been surgically removed. This can continue even with cuts in the spinal cord high above the alleged structural source of the pain. Most of the population over the age of 20 show structural changes on X-ray or MRI; however these do not correlate with functional pain in the vast majority of people. A herniated or bulging disc in your mind, caused by misinterpreting an MRI, causes more suffering and more difficult to heal than a true "surgical" herniated disc, which occurs very rarely.

A New Approach to Chronic Pain

Step 1: Take a very active role in your healing; learn about your condition by reading from both the traditional and non-traditional literatures; be willing to explore,

Step 2: Make a commitment to your healing; which includes being respectful of the process—be patient (not a patient!). Placing unrealistic expectations upon your medications ("magic bullet"), your provider, or yourself only leads to frustration and inconsistency. Actively listen for the small changes that will herald the beginning of your healing process.

Step 3: Before any therapies begin, there should be a thorough medical evaluation, sometimes including diagnostic tests, to rule out hidden or reversible conditions that present with pain. Then, based upon your goals and priorities, work actively with your healing practitioners to develop a plan.

Some people seek immediate relief-others prefer a less aggressive, long-term approach. The ultimate goals are to use minimum medications and to develop a healing and healthy lifestyle.

Step 4: Initial treatment may require medications and passive therapies (massage, physical therapy, chiropractic, acupuncture) to provide comfort. They can be helpful in getting you started on a healing course. Active approaches, such as yoga, journaling and nutrition (proper diet, herbs and supplements) should be utilized as well, since they can decrease the need for medications and passive therapies, are generally safer, give more self-reliance, are always available, and are often less expensive.

Following such an approach, I have seen hundreds of patients achieve surprisingly good results in a matter of months. These include people who have had prior back surgeries, or "incurable" conditions such as arthritis and spinal stenosis. Chronic mood disorders have also responded well to this approach.

IMPORTANT NOTE: This general information should not be used to make decisions about medical care without the involvement of a knowledgeable practitioner.

For More Information

- O See Dr. Cheikin's related articles on: Detoxification, Elimination and Simplification and What We Really Need
- O Dr. Cheikin's website, www.cheikin.com, has helpful articles on related topics.
- O Call to be placed on a contact list for lectures, workshops, classes and other services offered by Dr. Cheikin.
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