

LAYLA

Mental Health & Chronic Pain



Introduction

Chronic pain and mental well-being are intricately linked. Prolonged pain can affect one's mental state, and vice versa. This resource explores their connection, providing insights and tools for holistic health management.

Disclaimer: The content on this resource is for informational purposes only and should not be considered healthcare or medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Consult with a healthcare professional for appropriate support.



What is the pain cycle?

Chronic pain can proliferate through neural and psychological channels. Even after healing, the brain can become conditioned to feel pain. Sensations or movements from a previously injured area can trigger anxiety, making one fear further damage, which heightens the brain's awareness of it. This can create more anxiety and less movement leading to further changes to the nervous system that facilitate chronic pain. It is important to recognize that fears, misconceptions, and anxiety about pain may be creating more pain. Pain does not always mean that there is damage or that something physically is wrong. Also, structural abnormalities are not always matched to pain intensity (i.e. a herniated disk can be painless).

Pain vs Suffering

Pain refers to the challenging, immediate, and often unavoidable sensations we experience, whether they are physical, emotional, or psychological (i.e., discomfort). Suffering is the added layer of distress or negative meaning we place upon our pain. It's the result of how we interpret, relate to, or think about our pain. For instance, if someone thinks, "I'll never lead a normal life because of this pain," the anguish and despair from that thought add suffering on top of the actual pain.

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Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) for Chronic Pain

CAs with many therapeutic frameworks, ACT frames the problem as the way that you suffer due to your pain (i.e., your relationship to the pain), not the pain itself. Therefore, the goal of ACT is not the reduction of pain but the reduction of one's suffering. We can change our perspective on and reaction to pain to such a degree that the effects of pain on your life can be substantially reduced.

If you are suffering from chronic pain, much of your suffering is likely coming from trying to deal with or feeling unable to deal with the pain rather than from the pain itself. Your efforts to control your experience of pain are what leads to the majority of your suffering because these efforts are oftentimes based on restricting yourself in some way.

For instance, you may think you can control your pain by not going on a walk. However, even after choosing not to walk, your pain persists. So you make more and more choices of this nature with the hopes that it will reduce your pain, but your life becomes progressively more limited. While avoidance might bring short-term relief, it often leads to long-term suffering and can prevent individuals from living a life consistent with their values (avoiding physical activity even though one values being active), emotional, or psychological (i.e., discomfort). Suffering is the added layer of distress or negative meaning we place upon our pain. It's the result of how we interpret, relate to, or think about our pain. For instance, if someone thinks, "I'll never lead a normal life because of this pain," the anguish and despair from that thought add suffering on top of the actual pain.

Acceptance

In the ACT framework, acceptance is about fully experiencing one's emotions, memories, sensations, or thoughts without trying to change, avoid, or judge them. This doesn't mean resignation or passivity but rather a conscious decision to allow these experiences to be present. For someone with chronic pain, acceptance might mean recognizing that pain will be present and determining how to embrace aspects of life without the pain being completely dissipated

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Living your values

Values are seen as chosen life directions or the qualities one wishes to embody in various life domains (e.g., family, work, health). Values give life meaning and purpose. "Living your values" refers to taking actions aligned with these chosen life directions. It's about behaving in ways that reflect what is genuinely important and meaningful to an individual, even in the face of challenges and distress. For someone with chronic pain, living according to their values might mean participating in family activities because they value family connection, even if it means experiencing pain during the process. While pain might be an inevitable part of life for some, suffering is often exacerbated by avoidance strategies and not living in alignment with one's values.

Note: Acceptance of pain is not intended to mean that pain will never resolve or to accept a life of suffering. In fact, the intention is to reduce suffering, ideally reduce pain through reversing the pain cycle, and to increase enjoyment in life

Acceptance & Commitment Action Items

Acceptance

1

Embracing Pain Without Judgment

Try acknowledging pain without assigning negative labels or ruminating over it. Instead of thinking, "this pain is unbearable," one might simply observe, "I'm experiencing pain."

2

Reducing Avoidance

Try to not avoid important aspects of your life due to pain, even if this means participating in activities in a modified capacity.

3

Decreasing Struggle

Fighting against pain can increase suffering. Try letting go of this constant struggle and acknowledging that pain, while uncomfortable, is a part of your current experience.



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Commitment

1

Value Clarification

Identify what truly matters to you — be it family, work, hobbies, or other pursuits. What kind of life do you want to lead, despite the pain?

2

Goal Setting

Based on the clarified values, set specific, measurable goals. For example, if you value family time, a goal might be to spend an afternoon with family once a week, even if it means tolerating some level of pain.

3

Taking Action

Commitment is about taking consistent action towards those goals despite potential pain barriers. It's about making the choice to live in accordance with one's values, even when it's challenging.

