

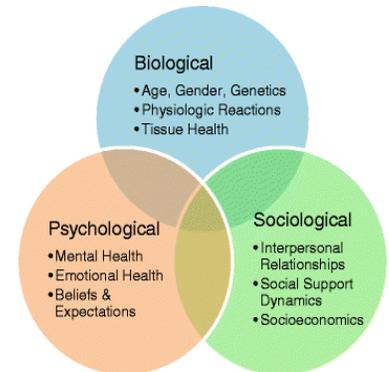


The Psychosocial Side of Chronic Pain

Biopsychosocial Model:

Chronic pain is a complex medical condition influenced by a variety of psychosocial factors including stress, thoughts/beliefs, mood, and social

environment factors. In turn, chronic pain impacts physical, emotional, and interpersonal functioning as well as overall quality of life (Turk & Okifuji, 2002). The biopsychosocial model of chronic pain offers an integrated view of chronic pain that accounts for physiological/biological, psychological, and sociological aspects of pain (Turk & Okifuji, 2002). This model (as pictured below) also opens the door for additional treatment options for chronic pain management.



The Chronic Stress of Chronic Pain:

Chronic pain is by definition a form of chronic stress (Caudill, 2016). The stress response (“fight or flight”) is a physiological and psychological reaction to a perceived threat in the environment. If the stress response is continuously or repeatedly activated due to a chronic stressor such as chronic pain, it becomes maladaptive (Schneiderman, Ironson, & Siegel, 2005). A state of chronic stress can exhaust your body’s ability to restore itself to normal. This can contribute to symptoms including (Caudill, 2016):

- Increased muscle tension
- Anxiety and depression
- Diminished immune system functioning
- Diarrhea and/or constipation
- Difficulty sleeping
- Fatigue
- Headaches
- Poor concentration
- Shortness of breath
- Weight gain or loss



The Benefits of Relaxation:

An effective way to counter the stress response is with the “relaxation response.” It has also been a successful strategy for reducing physical tension and facilitating tolerance of chronic pain (Benson, 1993). The relaxation response is a “physical state of deep rest that changes the physical and emotional responses to stress...and the opposite of the fight or flight response” (relaxationresponse.org, n.d.).

Relaxation Techniques:

Below are examples of relaxation techniques that can be utilized to activate the relaxation response:

- Deep breathing
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Biofeedback
- Self-Hypnosis
- Visualization
- Mindfulness-based stress reduction
- Meditation
- Yoga
- Tai Chi



Diaphragmatic Breathing:

Diaphragmatic breathing or deep breathing is a simple way to reduce a stress response. Most individuals are shallow or “chest breathers.” Shallow breathing can restrict the range of motion of your diaphragm, inhibit your lungs from completely filling with air, and leave you feeling short of breath and anxious (Relaxation Techniques, 2015). Following are the steps to practice deep breathing (Relaxation Techniques, 2015):

- Find a comfortable place to sit or lie down.
- Breathe in slowly through your nose. Your chest and abdomen should rise as you are breathing in.
- Continue breathing in until your whole abdomen expands.
- Slowly breath out through your mouth.
- For further relaxation, practice this deep breathing technique for 10-20 minutes, once or twice a day.

Quick and Easy Relaxation Strategies (Caudill, 2016)

- Take a deep breath. As you exhale, imagine tension and stress leaving your body.
- Take a moment to tense your muscles (with caution not to strain your muscles). Take a deep breath in and slowly exhale, releasing your tension as you breathe out. Repeat until tension is gone.
- Take a deep breath while counting to ten. Hold for at least one second. Slowly exhale, again to the count of ten.
- Take a moment to notice where you carry stress and tension in your body. Many people clench their jaw when stressed. Others carry stress in their neck or shoulders. Breathe into the area in which you carry your tension. Imagine every time you breath out you are releasing tension from that area.

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