

Chronic Pain: A Silent Epidemic?

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Here we are, living in one of the worlds most technically advanced countries, yet struggling with chronic pain in epidemic proportions. So, why are Americans suffering so much?

Pain is a blessing. It is a signal that something is wrong. The body's response is to begin the healing process, leading to the elimination of the pain. If a barrier to healing exists, the process is stalled and pain persists. If the pain persists for more than 3 months, then by definition, it is considered to be chronic in nature.

A 1999 study by Elliot and colleagues reported that over 50 million Americans suffer from chronic pain. In addition, they reported pain to be the leading cause of lost productivity, costing employers \$80 billion per year. That was in 1999, and based on reports I've read, the problem is getting worse.

You might consider investigating this yourself and take a chronic pain poll of your family and friends. Ask about stiff/sore/burning necks, shoulders and backs. Does anyone have recurrent headaches, achy joints, or jaw pain? How about hip pain that comes whenever someone climbs stairs or elbow pain that is aggravated by computer work? Or maybe you know a parent or grandparent who complains of pain between the shoulder blades after holding a baby.

Ok, so what's the point? A lot of people have pain; let them deal with it and get on with life, right? No, the point is that we need to offer effective ways to help these good people heal and find new meaning with the experience of pain. My own experience working with this population leaves me brimming with hope and optimism. And the point is really more than mere pain. It is about energy levels, sleep quality, relationships, productivity, and stress tolerance, all of which affect quality of life. This is how chronic pain can affect a whole community, not just those with the chronic pain.

So what are the effective ways to treat chronic pain in today's world? I say *you decide* what is best to do about your chronic pain. Are the treatments you've experienced or heard about working? We must ask, "What kind of long-term results are people getting and how is the intervention addressing the root problem?" Am I seeing positive changes that essentially hold and improve from one treatment to the next? If not, you may consider getting out there and finding therapies that do. And don't be afraid to ask around and see what others have experienced.

Thank you for taking the time to think about and expand your awareness regarding chronic pain. And for those of you who carry this cross, I write these words for you: the silent and often forgotten carriers of chronic pain. We must not lose hope, but remain optimistic to the healing potential that really exists for all of us. Many blessings to you in this journey.