



## “Psychology Works” Fact Sheet: Chronic Pain

### WHAT IS CHRONIC PAIN?

**Chronic Pain** is pain that does not go away. When pain lasts longer than 3 or 6 months, or **beyond the usual time of recovery**, it is said to be chronic. There are different types of chronic pain, many of which are not clearly understood. Chronic pain may be associated with an illness or disability, such as cancer, arthritis, or a phantom limb. Some types of pain start after an injury or accident and become chronic over time. Others may begin gradually, as is sometimes the case with low back pain. In some types of chronic pain, like migraine headaches, the pain is recurrent, rather than constant. There are many other kinds of chronic pain, such as postsurgical pain, fibromyalgia, temporomandibular disorders, and neuropathic pain. In some cases, the cause of chronic pain is known, whereas in many other cases, it is not.

It is estimated that **between 10% and 30% of Canadians experience chronic pain**. The direct and indirect costs associated with chronic pain are staggering, and they are estimated to be billions of dollars annually. Chronic pain affects both sexes, however, the rates are slightly higher in women. Although chronic pain can occur at any age, it is most common in middle age (for additional information about pain in the elderly, please see the CPA “Chronic Pain Among Seniors” Fact Sheet). Chronic pain can make simple movements hurt, disrupt sleep, and reduce energy. It can impair work, social, recreational, and household activities. People who have been injured in accidents may develop other symptoms, such as anxiety. Chronic pain can have a negative impact on financial security and, in some cases, it can contribute to alcohol or drug abuse. It can also disrupt marital and family relationships.

Pain is invisible. This can lead people who experience chronic pain to feel misunderstood or alone in their suffering. Some people find the legitimacy of their pain is questioned. Other people believe pain is “all in the head.” Pain is, indeed, all in the head because the brain is located in the head, and the origin of pain is in the brain. Given the impact pain can have on quality of life and other life domains, it is not surprising that **more than a quarter of people who experience chronic pain also experience significant depression or anxiety**.

**Medications** are one of the most common ways to treat pain. Indeed, medications can be helpful, however, the suitability of long-term use needs to be carefully considered.

### HOW CAN A PSYCHOLOGIST HELP A PERSON WITH CHRONIC PAIN?

Psychologists are involved in many aspects of chronic pain, including assessment, treatment, research, teaching, and advocacy. In terms of treatment, **psychologists use several different approaches and techniques** to help people with chronic pain improve their quality of life and regain their sense of purpose. They also focus on important themes, such as acceptance and loss. Specific techniques to help people with chronic pain include support, education, and skill building in areas such as relaxation, stress management, problem solving, goal setting, sleep hygiene, and assertiveness.



**Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)** is an approach that focuses on thoughts, feelings, and actions. It aims to help people think and behave in more adaptive ways. **Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT)** is another psychological approach that focuses on acceptance, choice, and taking action. It aims to help people live in ways that are consistent with their values. **Mindfulness-based stress reduction** is yet another approach that has been shown to help individuals with persistent pain. **In all cases, the basic goal is to improve functioning and help people live more meaningful lives, as opposed to eliminating pain symptoms.** A vocational assessment examines a person's interests, aptitudes, and abilities. It is useful for individuals who may need to change the way in which they work or the kind of work they do. Psychotherapy for anxiety and/or depression can be very helpful for individuals experiencing chronic pain. When indicated, treatment for drug or alcohol abuse helps people deal with addiction. For people who find that chronic pain has affected their personal relationships, couple/marital or family therapy can be beneficial.

### **ARE PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES EFFECTIVE?**

**Psychological approaches have been shown, in numerous scientific studies, to help people with chronic pain** improve the quality of their lives. In particular, they are known to increase functioning in many life domains, such as activities of daily living, emotional health, and interpersonal relationships. Following psychological treatment, people report they are more active, less depressed, less anxious, more confident, and more in control. In many cases, they endorse reductions in pain and physical symptoms. Even though people may continue to experience pain, it is often more manageable.

Although individual therapy may be offered, people experiencing chronic pain are often treated in groups where they are able to share their experiences with others who live with pain. Because chronic pain is complex, **psychologists often work in interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary teams** with other health care professionals, such as physiotherapists, occupational therapists, physicians, nurses, social workers, and pharmacists to help people with chronic pain develop satisfying and healthy lifestyles. Interdisciplinary chronic pain rehabilitation programs are as effective in reducing pain intensity as medications and medical interventions; however, they are more effective in decreasing medication use, reducing health care utilization, improving functional activities, improving mood, and promoting return to work.

### **HOW CAN RESEARCH HELP?**

In addition to working directly with people who have chronic pain, psychologists have contributed significantly to our understanding of chronic pain through many kinds of research. **Clinical research** has been conducted by psychologists, often in collaboration with organizations, in an attempt to reduce the incidence of some types of chronic pain, either through injury prevention or early intervention programs. Clinical research has also helped develop effective treatments for chronic pain, and it has led to increased awareness of how psychological variables are associated with pain and suffering.



## WHERE DO I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

**For information about chronic pain**, you can contact the North American Chronic Pain Association of Canada at 1-800-616-PAIN (7246), 150 Central Park Drive, Unit 105, Brampton, Ontario L6T 2T9; or visit their web site at [www.chronicpaincanada.org](http://www.chronicpaincanada.org). You can also contact the Canadian Pain Society at 905-404-9545, 1143 Wentworth Street West, Suite 202, Oshawa, ON L1J 8P7; [www.canadianpainsociety.ca](http://www.canadianpainsociety.ca). The Canadian Pain Coalition is another excellent resource ([www.canadianpaincoalition.ca](http://www.canadianpaincoalition.ca)).

Information about **pain in children** is available at the web site entitled "Pediatric Pain - Science Helping Children" at Dalhousie University, <http://pediatric-pain.ca/>.

**Consultation with or referral to a registered psychologist** can help guide you as to the use of these therapies.

*This fact sheet has been prepared for the Canadian Psychological Association by Dr. John Kowal of the Ottawa Hospital Rehabilitation Centre.*

Revised: January 2015

Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: [factsheets@cpa.ca](mailto:factsheets@cpa.ca)

Canadian Psychological Association  
141 Laurier Avenue West, Suite 702  
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5J3  
Tel: 613-237-2144  
Toll free (in Canada): 1-888-472-0657