The Multi-Dimensional Experience of Pain

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Dr. Dan Chartier, a Raleigh-based psychophysicologic psychotherapist at Life Quality Resources, is well-versed in the nuances of treating pain in all of its manifestations.

“My experience is that all life is periodically subject to pain—sometimes chronically—and so for me the gold standard of psychological well-being is adjustment. “From the moment we come into the world,” he observes, “we’re asked to continuously make adjustments, and the older we get the more adjustments we have to make.”

Managing pain is one of those adjustments, because we may be certain that life will include this experience, whether it’s a trip and fall as a child learning to walk or adults with sprains and crashes of all kinds. Life experience requires that we learn to make adjustments and get on with our lives as best we can. How fast can a three-legged dog run? As fast as it can—it still runs. It’s our ability to adapt and adjust, or lack thereof, that either keeps us functional and reasonably happy, or keeps us in misery.”

TWO CATEGORIES

Patients who come to Dr. Chartier often divide neatly into two categories. “Feedback is a highly effective component in a program of pain management, pain reduction, or pain elimination,” he says. “And learning the self-regulation skills that are the essence of biofeedback training takes time and effort. Biofeedback is a great ally of patients who want to take charge of their own health. They gain understanding and commitment to the idea of self-regulation and self-control.

“Those in the second category, fewer in number, are more passive: They simply want someone to fix them. While they may have been referred to me by a physician, once they learn that biofeedback is a learning process that may require weeks or even, in some cases, months to achieve good results, they may say, ‘I don’t want to do this, I just want a pill.’ ”

“It’s quick and easy to take a pill,” Dr. Chartier acknowledges, “even though that pill may cost hundreds of dollars a month. But in terms of cost and long-term benefits, biofeedback is, I think, a better choice. Once you stop taking the pill, you have perhaps spent many thousands of dollars, and the condition it is intended to control is often still there. Complete biofeedback training and you gain a skill set that lasts a lifetime.”

Biofeedback, explains Dr. Chartier, “involves using electronic instruments to monitor specific, often unconscious physiological activities and habit patterns of the body and then feeding back the information to the patient. Once the patient is aware of what their body is doing, they can learn how to change those patterns to reduce or eliminate symptoms. Biofeedback patients, for example, may learn how to raise or lower peripheral (fingertip) temperature, to reduce high blood pressure or avoid migraine headaches. The key point is the technology of biofeedback helps the patient learn the skill of self-regulation.”

PHANTOM LIMB PAIN

Some years ago Dr. Chartier worked with a patient who was suffering from intense, unrelenting phantom limb pain.

“This gentleman was a truck driver who was involved in a collision with another truck that crossed the center line and hit him head-on. He had an awful, mangling, crushing injury to his right leg, which eventually, because of infection, was amputated.

“But the lower part of this leg, which no longer physically existed, was still represented in his brain as a tremendous source of pain. He was open to biofeedback training—he was desperate for resolution of the problem. As a consequence, he was able to use some of the biofeedback self-regulation and awareness techniques to shift focus and perception and, within three sessions, he found the relief he was seeking. He was able to gain control over the neural processes that connected pain to a non-existent limb, and to also work through the psychological grief and loss he was experiencing as a result of this accident.”

It was a case that again confirmed for Dr. Chartier that one of the critical elements in the management of pain is how we perceive the experience. “In biological terms, pain is one of a number of perceptions or neural stimulations that occur within the human body. The brain categorizes it as pain. We are fully responsible for the psychological overlays we may attach to the experience. That was true for my truck driver patient with phantom limb pain: His very real pain was deeply connected to the horror of the event and the sense of loss that he no longer had this limb.”

THE BIOFEEDBACK PROCESS

“People who learn to manage their pain recognize these same neural perceptions, but respond to them differently, with deeper understanding,” notes Dr. Chartier. “In some cases, where pain is related to extreme muscle contractions or a hyper-aroused autonomic nervous system—the so-called flight-fight response—the biofeedback process and related self-regulation can help a person release those muscles and thus ease the pain. They learn to calm down the autonomic nervous system and re-establish better blood flow, for example, which may eliminate the pain entirely. We have great interest in pain control, and we’re equally interested in the elimination of the causes and sources of pain.”

In some instances, Dr. Chartier notes, pain may relate to old psychological and emotional wounds that linger in the back and then, perhaps decades later, a physical injury such as a back strain or a ruptured disc or nerve compression injury will suddenly give that emotional pain an attachment point.

“Even though effective medical treatment is proceeding for the physical problem, the subjective degree of pain and suffering that the person continues to struggle with is quite significant. In order for healing to occur, the traumatized person has to learn to work with their physical injury and pain, and ultimately to work through those emotional wounds as well. As the wounds are addressed and relieved, we can see objective changes from the biofeedback point of view—and the person truly begins to feel better, to suffer less, to feel more vibrant in their life. They have healed not only physically, but also psychologically and emotionally.”

For further information about neurofeedback and psychotherapeutic services offered by Dr. Lucy Chartier and Dr. Dan Chartier and their associates, contact:

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