

Pain and depression can be—and often are—the classic Catch 22, notes Raleigh Psychiatrist Dr. Mona Gupta. “When I am working with a patient in chronic pain, who also is exhibiting all the classic signs of depression and anxiety, we very often come to a place of considering the classic dilemma: Is chronic pain the root cause of this patient’s anxiety and depression? Or is the anxiety and depression the fundamental cause of this patient’s chronic pain? And the answer to both those questions very often is ‘Yes.’

“It’s certainly true that anxiety and depression can make you feel like you’re in chronic pain,” notes Dr. Gupta. “Your body aches, your mind hurts, and it feels like you’re walking around, draped with lead. Often, anti-depressant medications—such as Cymbalta—are used to help people suffering with chronic pain. On the other hand, chronic pain can and often does lead people into depression. They feel trapped. They feel they’re in a situation that is desperate and hopeless.

“Cymbalta is a drug that clearly expresses the duality of this situation. It was originally approved to relieve the pain of fibromyalgia, which is a chronic pain syndrome. And it is also used to treat major depressive disorder in adults, along with other approved applications.”

JAMES AND PAIN

The bottom line, Dr. Gupta says, is that depression hurts. “I had one patient, we’ll call him James, who was constantly in pain with back issues and it was affecting all parts of his life. He complained that he could no longer exercise, he had to cut back on his work, there was less and less fun in his life, and he generally found life increasingly frustrating—all because of his hurting back.

“James was among the throng of highly functional people who can’t go to work, basically cannot function effectively, can’t live life as they once did—all because of pain.

“James was one of those people who get stuck in bed, increasingly experiencing hopelessness and helplessness, absolutely unwilling to accept the fact that if he was willing to modify his life and activities somewhat, he could still be engaged and productive.

“Acceptance of what is can be very powerful,” she explains. “I went down this path with this patient, building a sense of acceptance for what was and could be, and it changed his life. Once he accepted the fact that he would in all probability experience chronic pain for the rest of his life, he put his energy into finding effective ways to cope with this life event. And he did it with great success.

“To be healthy and engaged and productive, we have to be willing to adjust to what is rather than bemoan the loss of what was. I’ve had patients who had chronic, debilitating diseases, and without exception the patients with better, more positive outlooks about life and their own health had



Dr. Mona Gupta

Feeling the Pain

of Depression

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“Is anxiety and depression the fundamental cause of this patient’s chronic pain?”

far better outcomes. If you have a negative attitude about the hand you’ve been dealt, it’s not likely that you are going to do as well. You’ll tend to feel the pain more intensely. You will be more dysfunctional.

“On the other hand, if you have intense back pain, you may choose to say ‘I’m not going to let this take over my life, I’m going to figure this out. I might have to adjust the way I work out or the way I live my life, but I’m still going to have a productive life.’ If and when patients adopt and embrace that attitude, honestly that’s 80 percent of the battle.”

NATURE OF PAIN

Because she is a psychiatrist, most people coming to Dr. Gupta are seeking help with a variety of emotional issues, such as depression or anxiety. “But there is a

tendency,” she says, “to put people in a box. While a new patient may present with classic symptoms of anxiety, for example, there may be a host of related factors that go with that diagnosis. It’s critical to look at the patient as a whole and to understand, broadly and deeply, what is causing her presenting anxiety. Could it be something else that is actually out of the patient’s awareness? My job is to look at the patient as a whole, make a good, educated estimate of what is causing the presenting issue of pain or anxiety, and determine if, in fact, it could be something else entirely. It’s important to have your antenna out, working overtime.

“I had a patient today who has recently had part of her colon removed. A real problem for her was that she went into and through this experience with little or no guidance. She had major surgery, now has a colostomy bag, and her life is changed forever. Unfortunately, no one prepared her for these changes—no one went over dietary issues, changes in medication, and the need to alter these approaches.

“It’s so important, so valuable, to explain these issues, step-by-step. And it is hard in medicine to do that right now, because everyone is working under intense time pressure.

“So when this patient came to me, feeling very depressed, we took the time to move through these issues, such as diet and exercise and meditative time, and the power of a positive attitude, to help her along her healing journey.”

EARLY TRAINING

That approach fits well with Dr. Gupta’s early training. She has been involved with health care and health issues for almost her entire life.

“Both of my parents are physicians, and are still practicing in Florida,” she notes. “My father is a gastroenterologist, and my mother is a psychiatrist.

“As a youngster, I spent a lot of time with my parents at their work, in hospital, clinical, and office settings. When I was eight, I was sure I wanted to be a gastroenterologist, just like my father. Later, obviously, my strong inclinations took me into the field of psychiatry and mental health.”

She seasoned her understandable pull into medicine by attending Nova Southeastern University College of Osteopathic Medicine, in Florida, emerging as an osteopathic physician “with holistic interests and tendencies.

“The term osteopathic physician is still an unknown to many of my patients. I explain that osteopaths attend four years of medical school training just like medical doctors, and are ‘real,’ ‘licensed’ doctors in all the states and dozens of foreign countries, both for medicine and surgery.

“And it’s true that osteopaths emphasize the importance of the musculoskeletal system, holistic medicine, proper nutrition, and environmental factors in maintaining good health. Osteopaths are known for using a hands-on approach to medicine and frequently manipulate or palpate as part of diagnosis and treatment.”

After her Nova training, Dr. Gupta completed her four-year residency in psychiatry at the Baptist Medical Center at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, NC about a decade ago. **hhl**

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