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Coping with Chronic Pain

Chronic pain is physically and psychologically stressful and its constant discomfort can lead to anger and frustration with yourself and your loved ones. By definition, chronic pain is pain that lasts longer than six months and affects how a person lives their daily life. While physicians can provide treatment for the physical dimensions of chronic pain, psychologists are uniquely trained to help you manage the mental and emotional aspects of this often debilitating condition.

Several medical treatments may be used to alleviate chronic pain, including over-the-counter or prescription medication, physical therapy, and less utilized treatments, such as surgery. However, these options are only a few of the pieces necessary to solve the puzzle of chronic pain. Mental and emotional wellness is equally important—psychological techniques and therapy help build resilience and teach the necessary skills for management of chronic pain.

APA offers the following tips on coping with chronic pain:

Manage your stress – Emotional and physical pain are closely related, and persistent pain can lead to increased levels of stress. Learning how to deal with your stress in healthy ways can position you to cope more effectively with your chronic pain. Eating well, getting plenty of sleep, and engaging in approved physical activity are all positive ways for you to handle your stress and pain.

Talk to yourself constructively – Positive thinking is a powerful tool. By focusing on the improvements you are making, i.e. the pain is less today than yesterday or you feel better than you did a week ago, you can make a difference in your perceived comfort level. For example, instead of considering yourself powerless and thinking that you absolutely cannot deal with the pain, remind yourself that you are uncomfortable, but that you are working toward finding a healthy way to deal with it and living a productive and fulfilling life.

Become active and engaged – Distracting yourself from your pain by engaging in activities you enjoy will help you highlight the positive aspects of your life. Isolating yourself from others fosters a negative attitude and may increase your perception of your

pain. Consider finding a hobby or a pastime that makes you feel good and helps you connect with family, friends, or other people via your local community groups or the internet.

Find support – Going through the daily struggle of your pain can be extremely trying, especially if you're doing it alone. Reach out to other people who are in your same position and who can share and understand your highs and lows. Search the internet or your local community for support groups, which can reduce your burden by helping you understand that you're not alone.

Consult a professional – If you continue to feel overwhelmed by chronic pain at a level that keeps you from performing your daily routine, you may want to talk with a mental health professional, such as a psychologist, who can help you handle the physical and psychological repercussions of your condition.

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