

Chronic Pain

Chronic pain is an extremely common syndrome in the United States. At least 100 million Americans suffer from chronic pain each year, according to the Institute of Medicine. Chronic pain affects more Americans than diabetes, heart disease, and cancer combined.

Chronic pain usually has biological, psychological, and emotional factors associated with it. It can cause feelings of anger, hopelessness, sadness, and anxiety. In order to effectively treat it, you must address these factors in addition to the physical factors. For many, the emotional and psychological factors are often ignored. Understanding the Gate Control Theory of chronic pain is important for developing a plan to address these emotional and psychological factors.

Gate Control Theory

The Gate Control Theory has been around since the 1960s, originated by Ronald Melzack and Patrick Wall. This theory suggests that the spinal cord contains a series of "nerve gates" that either blocks pain signals or allows them to continue to the brain. Simply, the more open the gates, the more pain you feel. Factors that affect whether the gates open or closed largely have to do with thinking, emotions, and expectations about pain. Basically, if you expect something to hurt, it most likely will hurt worse. For example, if you are upset or angry, pain likely will feel worse than if you were calm and content.

What to do about Chronic Pain in addition to necessary medical interventions.

- **Meditate.** Meditation techniques like deep breathing can release body tension and invite a relaxed state to enter your body.
- **Reduce stress.** Take inventory of your priorities in life. These are the activities that you want to spend most of your time doing. Stop doing or reduce time spent on tasks that don't make the priorities list, especially the tasks that are time consuming.
- **Exercise.** Exercise at a comfortable level of fitness without aggravating the pain. Get your endorphins flowing, they are a natural way your body closes the nerve gates.
- **Stay away from alcohol and tobacco.** Chronic pain often affects sleep quality. Alcohol and tobacco affect sleep as well. Poor sleep tends to aggravate chronic pain.
- **Eat healthy.** A well-balanced diet that aids your digestive process, reduces heart disease, and keeps weight under control has immediate positive effects on the nerve gates, as well as long term effects that keep pain minimized.
- **Distraction.** When you focus on pain, it makes it worse rather than better. Create a menu-like list of activities that you can do when the pain seems to escalate.

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