
To Those Who Live With a Chronic Pain Patient

Living with someone who experiences chronic pain, you are probably aware of the emotions that your loved one experiences — frustration, anxiety, depression, anger, and hopelessness are among the most common. But do you know that you may go through many of the same emotions? You may struggle with your own needs and desires, and you may (or may not) feel guilty about needing to express those when your loved one is in pain. You may not understand how someone can be in pain when the doctors cannot find the cause of that pain.

Researchers know that pain is a *multidimensional* experience. This means that it affects many areas of life — physical, mental, emotional, social, and economic. It is important to understand that the first three areas in particular are thoroughly intertwined — affect one and you will automatically affect the others. When a patient is in severe pain (physical), the thought processes (mental) are affected — it becomes harder to concentrate and speech can become more hesitant and disjointed. Furthermore, depression (emotional) may set in, and the patient may feel a sense of hopelessness.

On the other hand, we also know that when a patient feels really good about herself, when she has received particularly good news (emotional), or when her mind is occupied with other, non-stressful matters (mental), she tends to experience the pain less (physical). The pain is still there, but she may be less aware of it.

Knowing this, how can we use this information for the patient's good? Although we might not be able to alleviate our loved one's physical suffering, we can affect her mental and emotional states. This will indirectly help to alleviate the pain she is

experiencing. With this basic understanding, let's examine ways to respond to an individual in pain.

Punishing Responses

Punishing responses are the least favorable way to respond to a person in pain. As the name implies, punishing responses are those that punish a patient for their experience of pain. Expressing irritation, frustration, and anger are all punishing responses. Ignoring the patient is also a punishing response. Note how the responses that follow put the blame for the pain (as opposed to the responsibility for it) on the patient. Punishing responses include (but are not limited to):

“Why can't you just tough this out?”

“The doctors can't find anything wrong, why are you hurting?”

“The last doctor said it was all in your head.”

“Do you have to moan so loudly?”

Being on the receiving end of these responses can trigger many reactions, from anger to sadness to despair. While these responses address the needs of the caregiver, they ignore those of the patient. This will not benefit the caregiver in the long run because of the negative effect on the mental and emotional states of the patient. As stated earlier, these indirectly affect the pain. In essence, punishing responses will never have a positive effect on a patient's experience with pain (or the caregiver's, except for the momentary release of anger or frustration), and can actually cause the pain to increase.

Sollicitous Responses

Sollicitous responses, while not the best way to respond, are still much better than punishing responses. Sollicitous responses offer help, but tend to move the responsibility for the pain from the patient to the caregiver. They also keep the patient's attention focused on the pain. Consider the following responses. The unspoken end of each of these sentences is "*because of your pain*":

"Can I get you some pain medicine?"

"Let me get you something to drink."

"Can I do anything to make it better?"

"You're sick, I'll do that for you."

Of course, there may be times when a caregiver should be solicitous. The patient may be in such excruciating pain that the best thing a caregiver can do is to get pain medication, or take over household chores. However, when these are done as a matter of course rather than based on the pressing needs of the moment, they actually can contribute to the patient's perception of her pain. The thought is, "I must really look or sound bad, my caregiver is doing so much for me."

As mentioned above, solicitous responses tend to take the responsibility for the pain off of the patient. The patient must assume full responsibility for her pain. This is not to say that she is the cause of the pain, just that she is the one who is primarily

responsible for managing the pain, and teaching others how best to respond to her.

Distracting Responses

The best way to respond to someone experiencing chronic pain is to attempt to *distract* him or her. As mentioned earlier, affecting the mental and emotional aspects of a patient's life will also affect the physical aspect. Helping the patient to get her mind off of her pain and involved with something else is an excellent way to respond. Watching a movie, talking about a particular subject, reading to the patient, or taking the time to laugh together will often lift a patient's spirits. Working puzzles, crosswords, or doing other things that involve intense concentration can take a patient's mind off of her pain. Getting a patient involved in a hobby might be another way to distract her. Talk to your loved one, and ask what would work best. You should both be working toward a common goal.

Most distracting responses have a few things in common. First, they tend to be more action oriented than word oriented. Second, they send the message that the patient can do something to positively affect her experience with pain. When the mind and/or the emotions are occupied with something other than attempting to find ways to deal with pain, the patient tends to notice the pain less.

The International Pelvic Pain Society was formed to allow physicians, psychologists, nurses, physical therapists, and other professionals to coordinate, collect, and apply a growing body of information on chronic female pelvic pain. In doing this, we hope to be able to provide more relief and insure a more normal lifestyle for our patients. For membership information for healthcare professionals and patients, please contact us.