

Body of Knowledge

Karen Kirsch MA CMA RSMT www.karenbodyofknowledge.com 360-705-1216

What is Psychophysiological Pain?

A chronic pain syndrome often begins when we have sustained an injury. In 6-8 weeks after an injury damaged tissue heals, the physical tissues will be repaired. During this time of healing a pain neuro-pathway has been established and is responsive to being triggered even after the physical healing is complete. This pathway has created something like a well-used groove and will easily react to stimulus. The pain may reoccur when sensation brings awareness to the area and over time less and less sensation is needed for the pain to flare. The combination of association (“I have a bad back, I have an injury”) and fear (“here it goes again, I will never be normal, what is wrong with me?”) will re-ignite pain reinforcing neuro-pathways with associative experience. This becomes a feedback loop, strengthening the pain pathway to be triggered by less and less stimulus. This experience convinces your body/brain that you are not okay, not healthy. This pain is *real*, it can be excruciating and debilitating. But it is no longer caused by damaged structure or tissue. With chronic pain the amount of pain is not an indicator of the amount of damage.

Chronic pain syndromes are often characterized by:

- Pain is triggered by an innocuous action. “That’s all I did was reach for my bag.”
- The pain is not triggered by something you think would aggravate it. “I went for a long hike and I was fine.”
- Pain is triggered by or increases with emotional upset.
- It is intermittent; you can have months or years pain free only to have it reoccur without a new injury.
- The pain syndrome began around a significant life event. (divorce, job change, death, etc.)
- The pain makes you gradually restrict more and more activities although there is no change in medical diagnosis.
- The pain is “cured” by surgery or treatment only to reoccur over time or by replaced by another chronic condition in a new place.

Learning about this syndrome is the first step in changing it. Pain is in the brain. This means that our brain controls when we will feel pain and when we won’t. It doesn’t mean that it’s all in our head, it doesn’t mean we will stop hurting by just thinking differently. It means the brain controls the perception of the stimulus from the body and we can work to change how the brain is perceiving danger.

We have all heard of a person walking or running away from an accident in which they were severely injured because they didn’t feel pain. When our brains decide is better not to feel pain it produces opioids, brain chemicals that block pain, and give you an opportunity to get to safety. It’s like the pain is postponed because it would be more damaging to be in pain right then. And at other times our brains decide that it is important to feel pain, to avoid greater injury. That’s when pain makes you stop and take care of yourself.

Our thoughts and emotions do affect our pain, sometimes to a significant degree and sometimes much less than we would hope. Pain cycles can be fueled by so called negative emotions. If we are trying to protect others from our anger or fear, our unconsciousness may simultaneously be working to protect us, to be safe, to get the best, to care only for ourselves. Then our unconscious is left with little it can do, and the only expression available without conscious agreement maybe making the body hurt. In this scenario pain is a distraction. It becomes easier or less painful to “have something wrong with me” than feel the ugly, harmful, dangerous or broken feelings we are harboring. And we are embarrassed or ashamed or feel guilty for this negativity. Building more negative self perception.

Expression of this anger or fear can become directed at the self because the past has taught us that we are powerless to take action to protect or assert ourselves. The unconscious self will create pain in the body to say “no, I will not participate in this world/relationship that is so harmful to me”. Even though our intense pain insures that we no longer have to participate in a world that hurt us, it also insures we can no longer participate in the aspects of our lives that are good.

Mind Body Syndrome or Tension Myositis Syndrome (TMS) or psychosomatic disorders or psychophysiological disorders are some of the terms used to describe this phenomenon. The pain is not because of tissue damage, there may be changes in the muscles and tissue but the pain is directed by the factors the brain uses to make pain.

If you think the pain you are experiencing is psychophysiological:

- Know you are not a victim of your body. Your body and mind are intimately and co dependently connected. The power of the mind to disrupt health is the same power that can disrupt pain and suffering.
- Take this opportunity to focus on what you might be feeling (in sensation as well as emotion). Open to introspection, be curious. There may not be one definitive right answer, but you can become aware of the pressures you have to keep emotions repressed or beliefs in place.
- When pain flairs notice your emotional state. What just happened? How do I feel about it? How might you make things easier for yourself?
- Can you relax right now? Even stopping to take 3 deep breaths gives your body a little more ease.
- Do you need to plan time to focus on your needs and feelings? Make a date with yourself, start small, when you can't make a week in Hawaii, try 20 minutes of uninterrupted focused time.
- Practice breathing, mindfulness, yoga, Qi Gong, etc. These techniques and strategies are good to develop when you aren't in the highest level of pain. You are building skills and you will have greater success taking on smaller challenges at first. If you can't do any of these things without pain you need to work with someone one on one who understands pain science. Get help that is not just medical, support, education in pain science, develop a program tailored to you.

Resources: <http://www.bettermovement.org/2010/seven-things-you-should-know-about-pain-science/>
www.unlearnyourpain.com www.greglehman.ca <http://www.maggiephillipsphd.com>
Explain Pain and Explain Pain Handbook by Lorimer Moseley & John Butler.