Mind Over Matter: Understanding the Psychology of Pain

By Sherry Gavanditti

Is it all in your head? Research is revealing that when dealing with pain, the brain plays an important part in determining to what degree and for how long you will experience pain. More than 30 million Americans suffer from some form of chronic pain. Not lamenting on your pain can give you a greater chance of getting better, with the help of your physician or a physical therapist and an individualized therapy program. Your attitude will play an important role in your own recovery.

Chronic worry about pain can lead to a pattern of catastrophic thinking. Repeated attention to pain can cause us to magnify the outcome and effects of pain and render us with little control over how we think and react to pain. Avoiding pain-associated behavior, such as not doing your prescribed physical therapy because you fear that it could increase your pain — even temporarily — can contribute significantly to your disability. You can’t expect to get better by denying yourself the help you need. It’s normal to feel anger, frustration or helplessness, but these feelings can be a precursor to treatment ineffectiveness. Don’t appraise your self-worth and abilities negatively because you can’t control your pain. Your response to pain can have both positive and negative effects. Taking action and exercising with the belief that you have control over your pain can improve your function and fitness. Chronic pain creates a barrier between who you were and who you now are, but it doesn’t have to be that way.

You Have Options
Therapy For Your Pain: Therapists at Menorah Park’s Peter B. Lewis Aquatic & Therapy Center see firsthand that those who stick to their rehab program have the greatest possible range of motion, and can do more activities. Debra Glett, physical therapist at the Center, notes that one aspect of movement and pain is its effect on the joints of the body. The joints require movement for health. One of the reasons for that is the synovial fluid, which delivers lubrication and nutrients to the joint cartilage, requires movement to circulate throughout the joint area. Unlike our blood, which is moving through our blood vessels even when we are at rest, delivering oxygen and nutrients to our muscles, skin, bones, etc., the fluid that nourishes the joints requires movement. A therapist can evaluate you and design an individualized safe program that is tolerable and will help you increase your activity.

“Aquatic exercise and therapy allow for activity that often cannot be tolerated on land,” Glett said. “Many clients who exercise for 30 to 60 minutes or more in the pool couldn’t tolerate more than 20 minutes of land-based activity. The pool is the gateway to increased activity on land and the progression to land-based exercise, the natural course of therapy. It remains an activity of choice for the regular weekly exercise routine of clients with long-standing chronic pain. An hour in the pool two to four times a week can help one to better do what they want on land, and in their professional, family, recreational and social lives.”

Angie Holpuck, also a therapist at the Center, says myofascial pain (painful muscles and trigger points) can be helped by several manual techniques such as dry needling (pushing a very thin needle through the skin to stimulate trigger points and release tight muscle bands) and a hands-on technique called MFR, or myofascial release (applying gentle sustained pressure into myofascial connective tissue is shown to reduce pain).

“As a physical therapist, I use these techniques in combination with active movement in the water or on land depending on the client’s needs and preference,” Holpuck said. “Once the myofascial pain is reduced, there is less muscle-guarding. Movement becomes easier.”

Lighten Up: And finally, consider losing weight, if you need to, as it will reduce pain and stiffness. Every 10 pounds you lose can lower your arthritis pain by up to 20 percent. The Center’s Health Maintenance program after your therapy can be very helpful. For more information on exercise classes, land-based or aquatic therapy, call 216-595-7345 or visit lewisaquaticcenter.org.

Retrain Your Brain: Krystal Culler, director of Menorah Park’s Center 4 Brain Health, has many suggestions and classes to help you take a mental climb away from your pain to a beautiful, healing altitude. "Aromatherapy, meditation, guided imagery, acupressure, acupuncture, visualization, massage, sound baths and other natural approaches can be helpful, and you can learn to cope. There may not be one fix, but there are lots of alternatives to help you find the wellness path you need," she said. You can find out more by emailing her at kculler@menorahpark.org or by visiting center4brainhealth.org.

Fear No More: Relaxing your mind, body and spirit to accept your limitations, surpass your expectations and continue your treatment is a first — and most powerful — step in healing.