

Changing Habits Can Alleviate Pain

by Lauren Hill

An often overlooked but extremely important aspect of chronic pain management is the role a person's habits of posture and movement play in their condition.

Bringing up the potential role of habits in pain is tricky. The mere suggestion that "you might be part of your problem" is no doubt a hard pill to swallow especially if you are feeling that you are a victim and this is being "done to you". However, in many cases your habits are actually contributing to some degree and you are "doing it to yourself".

Habits Contribute to Pain

The degree to which habits contribute to pain depends on the type of chronic pain. There is chronic pain that is clearly caused by an injury or illness or degenerative condition. Then there is pain that is initially caused by a known condition (arthritis for example) but the condition becomes exacerbated by your habits. Lastly, there is pain that can be completely caused by your habits. A lot of musculoskeletal pain falls into this last category. Pain management of the last two categories can be greatly facilitated by learning to pay attention to habits.

Take an example of someone with tension headaches who goes to an acupuncturist for treatment. The acupuncture treatment may be quite helpful. However, if the person goes home and daily bangs their head against the wall, the treatment can only be so effective. This is a rather crude example. However, many of us are contributing to our condition by habitually banging our head against the wall.

Improve Body Awareness to Relieve Pain

The news that you might be contributing to your pain is not bad news! If you are contributing to the problem that means that you can play a more active role in helping yourself than you previously realized. Taking concrete steps to improving awareness of your body and discovering what some of your habitual patterns are can provide a sense of control in an otherwise sea of helplessness.

The first step is to be willing to take some responsibility for yourself and not solely look to others to "fix the problem". The next step is to actually begin to pay attention to your body even though it is often the opposite of what you want to do. After all, why pay attention to something that is causing so much discomfort? However, if you are doing something that is causing problems and wish to stop doing it you first need to be aware of what you are doing.

It is amazing the effect a simple everyday activity done over and over can have on our discomfort. Often simply becoming aware of what you are doing and stopping doing it is enough to have a profound effect over time. A chronically tense shoulder or neck may be caused or

exacerbated by the simple act of always carrying a heavy handbag, briefcase or backpack on the same side day after day. Also you may tend to habitually throw your weight to one side or the other, as in always standing by sinking into the same hip or leaning to the same side in sitting. This can cause chronic imbalances and corresponding compensatory tension to set up in the body.

Pay Attention to Just One Thing at a Time

Choosing just one thing to begin to pay attention to is a reasonable and manageable way to start. Perhaps choosing to simply stop each time you go to lift your purse or briefcase will give you a chance to notice where you tend to place it and begin to make a choice to not go about carrying it in your habitual way and try something different.

Study of the Alexander Technique is one effective way to help improve awareness of your habits of posture and movement and offers a non-pharmacological approach to pain management that can be an effective adjunct to other therapies you may be using.

Lauren Hill is a nationally certified teacher of the Alexander Technique, a 100 year old method for learning to use the body more efficiently with less effort and more ease. Lauren teaches in St. Paul, Minnesota. Visit www.AlexanderTeachingStudio.com for more information.

This article originally appeared in the August 2011 issue of Essential Wellness.