Why am I being referred to a pain psychologist?

Patients sometimes question why their physician or health care provider wants them to see a pain psychologist to help them manage their pain.

They sometimes wonder:

Do they think my pain isn’t real?

Do they think my pain is all in my head?

Do they think I haven’t tried to cope?

Unfortunately, these mistaken but understandable reactions often deter patients who have chronic pain from following through with a recommendation to meet with a pain psychologist.

Rest assured, your health care provider knows that:

- Psychological factors are rarely involved in the cause of ongoing pain
- The experience of pain is affected by emotions, stress, relationship issues and numerous other psychological and social factors
- The most effective way to treat a complex condition like chronic pain is using a multi-disciplinary treatment approach that includes pain psychology

Pain psychology services are offered by:

Howard Gartland, PhD
Clinical health and rehabilitation psychology

Mercy Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation Center
557 N. Washington St., Janesville
(608) 755-7880

Mercy Walworth Hospital and Medical Center
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(262) 245-0535 (877) 893-5503

David Wakely, PhD, ABPP, BCIA-EEG
Board certified in Clinical Health Psychology and Neurofeedback

Mercy Clinic South
849 Kellogg Ave., Janesville
(608) 755-7960

Mercy Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation Center
557 N. Washington St., Janesville
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How long will I meet with a pain psychologist?

Initially, a pain psychologist will want to meet with you to learn your:
- Past and current pain experience
- Your coping methods and the effect pain has had on your life methods
- Social support system
- Emotional health such as depression and anxiety

Together, you will then develop realistic treatment goals and plans to meet your unique needs. Treatment typically lasts from 4 to 6 sessions to allow adequate time to learn, practice and use new skills.

What else do I need to know?
- Your pain psychologist does not replace your physicians or other health care providers. In fact, your pain psychologist will coordinate your care with these other providers.
- You will still take your prescribed medications. As you learn and use effective pain coping and self-management skills, it is often possible to reduce medications, under the supervision of your prescribing health care provider.
- Your pain psychologist's focus is on helping you cope with pain, not eliminating or finding a cure to your condition. Remember, psychological and/or social factors did not cause your pain to develop, but they do have a significant affect on how you experience pain.

But my pain is real

Chronic pain often leads to:
- Negative emotions, including a feeling of loss of control, helplessness, frustration, anger, tension and depression
- Feelings that those close to you do not understand your experience
- Family or friends offering advice that is simply not helpful

Unfortunately, these issues often make the experience of pain worse. A pain psychologist can help you with these experiences as well as show you how to use your mind (your thoughts and imagination) to reduce and effectively manage pain.

Does it really work?

Patients with chronic pain who learn, practice and use pain coping and self-management skills experience:
- Much less distress about pain
- Improved sleep
- Increased activity
- Often, noticeable reduction in pain intensity
- Overall improved mood and life satisfaction

What will I learn?

Your pain psychologist can teach you:
- How the nervous system senses, transmits and perceives pain
- Relaxation skills
- How to identify and modify pain-related thoughts or expectations
- To use biofeedback, imagery and hypnosis to improve comfort and coping
- Stress management skills
- How to address and manage anger
- How to improve sleep onset and duration
- Problem-solving skills

What is my role?

All experts (and most patients, by the way) agree that to successfully manage a chronic medical condition, such as heart disease and diabetes, patients must be active participants in their care. This is true of chronic pain as well. You’ll be asked to practice the self-management and coping skills you learn.