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When Pain Won't Go Away, Then What? Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for Chronic Pain – An Evaluation of Program Outcomes

Abstract:

Background: Chronic pain affects 1 in 5 Australians (Blyth et al., 2001) and estimated to cost \$AUD 34.3 billion per annum (Crossman, 2007). Chronic pain represents a major health issue in Australia, yet despite advances in medical technology, surgical techniques and pain medications, these approaches do not provide a complete solution for most chronic pain sufferers. Seeking control over pain can create significant problems in the lives of those with chronic pain, particularly when this search dominates all of their time and effort, brings unacceptable costs and leads pain sufferers increasingly away from experiences and activities that give their life meaning.

Avoidance of pain and pain inducing activities can lead to increased pain related disability. Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) the 'third wave' of cognitive behaviour therapy was used as the main treatment intervention in a Pain Management Program, with emphasis being on pursuing a valued life direction rather than emphasizing reductions in pain and distress. Pain desensitization was taught as a coping strategy for reducing fear of pain.

Methods: 26 participants attended one of 5 two week, full-time pain management programs at the Canberra Hospital Pain Management Unit in 2007.

Education and interventions were provided by members of a multidisciplinary pain team and included:

- Physiotherapy - graded exercise program
- Psychology – ACT approach to managing pain and its impact on mood and interpersonal relationships.
- Medical/Nursing – Education on pain pathophysiology, medication, and lifestyle management.

Results: One month following the pain program, significant reductions were observed in levels of Depression, Anxiety, Stress, Fear Avoidance, Pain Catastrophising and significant improvements in Pain Self-Efficacy. There was no change in pain intensity.

Conclusion: The outcome of the intervention demonstrated that ACT was effective in significantly reducing indicators of pain related disability and resulted in increased function when the focus shifted from trying to achieve pain control to pursuing a valued life despite pain.

Blyth, F., March, L. M., Brnabic, A., Jorm, L., Williamson, M., & Cousins, M. (2001). Chronic pain in Australia: A prevalence study. *Pain*, 89, 127-134.

Crossman, J. (2007). First study of Australia's high cost of pain reveals \$34 billion price tag [Electronic Version]. *MBF Foundation Ltd.*