



Associated Neurologists of Southern Connecticut

Health & Wellness Newsletter

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Stress , Stress, Stress!

By Dario Zagar, MD

Director, Neuropsychology and Health & Wellness Center



Welcome to the first issue of our Health & Wellness Newsletter! We hope you learn more about living with illness, chronic pain, headaches, and our holistic approach of treating neurologic disease.

Who among us does not feel occasionally overwhelmed by our lives? The everyday trials of work and family, as well as more distressing events, such as the loss of a job or caring for a sick family member can take their toll not only on our mental health, but also our physical well-being.

There is mounting data on the role that stress can play in conditions as varied as hypertension, multiple sclerosis (MS), and migraine, just to name a few, and we are gaining a better understanding of the biological mechanisms that are involved in doing so. Many patients are aware of this connection. For example, stress is the most commonly reported trigger for migraine sufferers and patients with MS or seizures frequently describe flare-ups related to life stresses as well.

For other patients, the connection may not be as clear, though it is no less real. Surprisingly, traumatic experiences occurring in childhood and adolescence increase the risk of chronic pain, such as fibromyalgia, back pain, and headaches, well into adulthood, even decades after the events occurred. This shows that stress can actually change how our brains are wired!

Just as these stresses can influence or even cause medical problems, dealing with stress and emotional factors can be an effective treatment for them. Techniques as simple as writing about difficult life experiences have been shown to reduce inflammation and to decrease pain severity in conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis and migraine, among others.

While it is easy to feel powerless when you are dealing with conditions such as chronic back pain or migraines, understanding and treating stress can be an effective way to take control of your life.

Helping You Live as Fully as Possible





“I have pain, so why is it I can't remember?”

By Amy Palmer, Psy.D., Neuropsychologist

This question is on the minds of many patients who come to our office. Some people who experience pain can find that they are not as mentally “sharp” as they used to be. Misplacing keys, forgetting people’s names, losing a train of thought and forgetting appointments are common complaints.

Why are these mental “slips” happening? Sometimes, a medical condition that is responsible for the pain can cause cognitive impairments such as decreased memory, attention, and problem solving. For example, someone who was in a car accident may have a back injury in addition to a head injury, thereby causing both pain and cognitive difficulties. Other times, pain medications can slow down thinking and affect the ability to pay attention and focus. And sometimes, the pain is so significant that it distracts the person during normal, everyday activities, such as being attentive during a conversation.

Cognitive problems are often very frustrating and concerning to patients. In addition to having to deal with pain, some patients begin to worry that they are “losing their mind.” Our neuropsychologists are able to conduct a comprehensive evaluation to find out what cognitive problems, if any, are present. Once any problems are pin-pointed we can offer suggestions on how to deal with cognitive problems associated with pain. Depending on the person, recommendations such as cognitive rehabilitation and behavioral pain management can help people improve their cognitive functioning. Sometimes we are even able to reassure patients that their functioning is within a normal range, alleviating some of the stress associated with the fear of cognitive decline. In every case, we strive to help each person live as fully as possible.

Living with Chronic Pain

By Deb Del Vecchio-Scully, LPC, Counselor/Health & Wellness Coordinator

Chronic Pain conditions have many aspects, some of which may be behavioral (thinking, feeling, doing). Stress is one of the most common factors that can increase pain. Under stress, the reaction is physical, emotional, mental and behavioral. Everything becomes more challenging and we have fewer resources to cope with the increased pressure and demands. Combine this with the stress of chronic pain itself, and one can easily become overwhelmed.

Fortunately, there are many ways to address the impact of chronic pain and stress on your mind and body in addition to medications and procedures. This approach is known as

Behavioral Pain and Stress Management and utilizes the techniques of Biofeedback, Clinical & Self Hypnosis, Relaxation, Breathing exercises, Sleep Hygiene (ways to improve insomnia) and Supportive Counseling. These techniques help to interrupt the stress response in our brains and foster stress hardiness and resilience. They also initiate the Relaxation Response© - a release of neurochemicals called Endorphins to foster relaxation.

It is common to tense to protect an injury or area of chronic pain, creating additional discomfort. Through the practice of relaxation techniques, tension can be released, thereby reducing pain.

Relaxation Response

A state of relaxed, passive attention to a repetitive or absorbing stimulus, that turns off the “inner dialogue” thereby decreasing the arousal of the brain’s sympathetic nervous system.

- ◇ Requires a mental focus, (repetition of a word, phrase, prayer, or movement)
- ◇ Receptive, open mind
- ◇ Quiet Environment
- ◇ Comfortable position

Parenting with Pain

By Christine McCarthy, Ph.D, Neuropsychologist

Parents who experience chronic pain bear an added burden of worry compared to parents who are in good health. As the experience of pain drives one to focus inwards, you may be less available to your children and have only limited resources available to focus on their needs. Honest and open communication with your children is the key component in the effective management of this struggle.



Some helpful practices include:

- ◆ Reassure your children that your irritability is not their fault (i.e. "I'm mad at my pain and not at you.").
- ◆ Be honest about the possibility that your pain may occasionally prevent you from keeping promises about involvement in their activities and events. Have a back up plan for who will assume your responsibilities.
- ◆ Consider your child's age when speaking with them about your pain. Young children benefit from very simple explanations and reassurances that they cannot 'catch' your pains. Older children will be receptive to more complex explanations about the physical bases for your pains and expectations for healing and disease progression.
- ◆ Reassure your children that their needs are very important to you. Keep their routines and schedules as regular as possible. Readily accept all help offered for rides and running errands.
- ◆ Maintain a balance between your children's desires to help out and their age appropriate desires to spend time with their friends and in their favored activities.
- ◆ Share information with the school regarding your health and concerns about your child's emotional wellbeing.
- ◆ Be as kind to yourself as you are to your children.

On the positive side, children who grow up within a family impacted by chronic pain are likely to develop rather high levels of emotional sensitivity and empathy towards others. They will also benefit from exposure to your efforts to maintain good habits for eating, exercising, and relaxing.

Clinical Trial Opportunities

Associated Neurologists of Southern Connecticut's Clinical Research Department is involved with many Clinical Trials providing our patients and the community with new and innovative medical treatment options for Migraines, MS, Post-herpetic Neuropathy, Diabetic Neuropathy, Alzheimer's Disease, Epilepsy, and other conditions.

By taking part in a Clinical Trial:

- ◇ You can play an active role in your own healthcare
- ◇ Gain access to new research treatments before they are widely available
- ◇ Obtain expert medical care at leading health care facilities during the trial
- ◇ Help others by contributing to medical research

- US Food & Drug Administration

If you or someone you know has been diagnosed with any of the following disorders:

Stroke, Migraines, Multiple Sclerosis, Arm Spasticity, Parkinson's Disease, Alzheimer's Disease, Spinal Cord Injury, Over Active Bladder, you may be eligible to participate in a Clinical Research Trial.

To learn more or to see if you or someone you know qualifies, please contact 203.333.1151 or www.anscneuro.com/clinicaltrials.shtml

Health & Wellness Center

Offering an Integrated Approach to your Health & Well-Being

At ANSC, we believe in treating the whole person, not just the illness. We treat many debilitating neurologic conditions that are associated with chronic pain and the difficult challenge of coping with the diagnosis of a chronic illness. We provide an extra level of medically-oriented care through our Health & Wellness Center, to provide natural therapies along with traditional therapies to help you reclaim your life and live as fully as possible.

Health & Wellness Coordinator

Through our Health & Wellness Coordinator's personalized guidance and expertise, you receive an extra level of medically-oriented care, designed to foster healing & well being. You'll receive a personalized pain management or wellness plan and follow-up, blending traditional and complementary methods, to reduce symptoms and enhance your quality of life.

**Acupuncture * Biofeedback * Clinical Hypnosis * Medical Massage
Relaxation & Meditation * Life & Wellness Coaching
Personalized Headache Management * Individual/Group Yoga Therapy**

For more Information on any of our services

www.ANSCHealthandWellness.com

Our Mission

The Health and Wellness Center at ANSC is committed to providing an integrated approach to health and well-being. We will strive to provide comprehensive management of our patient's health-care that includes integration of medical, psychological, and complementary medicine therapies.

To accomplish this, we will provide our patients with quality, personalized healthcare services that improve their feeling of well-being and overall health, so that they may maximize their personal potential and life goals.

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