Mindfulness, Emotions and Pain Treatment

Mel Pohl, M.D.
Medical Director
Las Vegas Recovery Center
Objectives

- Review nature of suffering
- Identify holding and attachment
- Describe mindfulness as it pertains to chronic pain
- Nutrition
- CBT, DBT, ACT
- Physical modalities
Pain Definition

“An unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage ....”

The International Association for the Study of Pain

(Mesky, 1979)
Pain is influenced by:

- Culture
- Context
- Anticipation and previous experience
- Emotional and cognitive factors
How does acute pain become chronic pain?

Surgery or injury causes inflammation

Peripheral Nociceptive Fibers

Transient Activation

Sustained Currents

Peripheral Nociceptive Fibers

Sensitization

Sustained Activation

Peripheral Nociceptive Fibers

CNS Neuroplasticity

Hyperactivity

Structural Remodeling

ACUTE PAIN

CHRONIC PAIN

Pain Switchboard

- Genetics
- Trauma

- COMT

NOCEPTION → PAIN
“...When touched with a feeling of pain, the ordinary uninstructed person sorrows, grieves, and laments, beats his breast, becomes distraught.

So he feels **two pains, physical and mental**.

Just as if they were to shoot a man with an arrow and, right afterward, were to shoot him with another one, so that he would feel the pains of two arrows...”

*The Buddha*
Mindfulness Meditation

- Based on Theraveda and Mahayana Buddhism – 500 BC - non religious.
- Focus is on insight (vipassana).
- Goal is NOT to eliminate pain or stress.
- Use intentional, focused awareness.
Mindfulness Practice

- Willful directed attention to **present moment without judgment**
- Daily practice – like tuning an instrument
- Changes the brain – neuroplasticity
- Enriches the brain’s neuronal structures –
  -- Enhances connections
  -- Affects neurotransmitter levels:
    - decreased cortisol & epinephrine (stimulation).
    - increased serotonin & GABA (relaxation, antidepressant).
Mindfulness Practice

- Meta-cognitive process (vs CBT).
- Change out relationship with our thoughts without changing the thoughts themselves.
- Detach from thoughts, feelings and physical sensations (attachment = suffering).
- Observer or spectator of thoughts.
Mindfulness Practice

- Utilize “beginner’s mind”
- Being open-hearted and open-minded to new possibilities
- Be kind to yourself (unconditionally loving)
- Tenderly holding and intimately knowing our suffering in any and all circumstances
Mindfulness Practice

- Sitting still takes courage!
- We don’t want to feel what we feel.
- We automatically want to cover over the pain in one way or another.
- Look directly with compassion and humor.
- Find meaning in the pain – use as an opportunity.
Mindfulness Practice

- Focus on an object - usually the breath.
- Thoughts ebb and flow (like bubbles).
- Bring attention back to the breath (training a puppy).
- No effort to clear thoughts or push away negatives – or hold positives.
- Cravings and urges are a desire for things to be different than they are.
- No “good” meditation – no outcome.
The Effects of Mindfulness Meditation on Chronic Pain

After 3 months of daily meditation in 27 older adults (>65):
- Less pain
- Improved attention
- Enhanced well-being
- Improved quality of life

Morone, Lynch, Cheryl et.al.  
Mindfulness Practice
Suffering (Dukkah)

- Attachment to thoughts or outcomes.
- Wanting physical states to be different (e.g. pain).
- Relentless mind activity (ruminating, obsessing, catastrophizing).
- Deep-seated habitual responses to the world.
- Attachment to PAIN seems grounding – it is solid and familiar!
Mindfulness Practice
Resistance

- Closed – minded
- Impatient – restless
- Unkind thoughts and judgments
- Cynical attitude
- All fear – based!
BODY SCAN

- Burmese practice called sweeping
- Jon Kabat Zinn, Ph.D
- “Self Cat Scan”
- Observer’s attitude – bearing witness to the pain – awareness of the pain is not the pain
- Utilize Compassion and kindness towards self.
Emotional Intensifiers

- Guilt
- Anger – Resentments
- Loneliness
- Helplessness
- Fear
What is the fear?
Fear that if I allow the pain in:

- I’ll die.
- I’ll be unhappy and unable to escape.
- I won’t be able to handle it.
- I don’t deserve this and it won’t work.
- I’ll hurt myself.
Cycle of Uncontrolled Pain and Fear

- Pain
- Avoidance Behaviors
- Decreased Mobility
- Social Limitations
- Diminished Self-Efficacy
- Altered Functional Status
Ways to reduce pain intensity

- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).
- Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT).
- Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT).
- Attention/Distraction.
- Control/Placebo effect.
- Fear reduction.
Reversal of Cycle of Fear and Pain

- Pain
- Exercise
- Increased Mobility
- Improved Function
- Enhanced Self-Efficacy
- Less Pain
Pain Recovery – Develop Balance

• Mental
• Emotional
• Physical
• Spiritual

RESULTING CHANGES

• Relationships
• Positive actions and behaviors
Non-Medication Treatments

- Exercise – Physical Therapy
- Chiropractic Treatments
- Therapeutic Massage
- Reiki
- Acupuncture
- Nutrition
- Individual + group therapy
- Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Kabat-Zinn)
- Yoga - Chi Gong
5 Key Facts:

- All pain is real.
- Emotions drive the experience of chronic pain.
- Opioids often make pain worse.
- Treat to improve function.
- Expectations influence outcomes.
THANK YOU

Mel Pohl, MD, FASAM
702-515-1373
mpohl@centralrecovery.com
adaywithoutpain.com
thepainantidote.com