

Pain Psychology for Patients with Complex Regional Pain Syndrome

Marilyn S. Jacobs, Ph.D., ABPP
Los Angeles, CA
mjacobphd@gmail.com

Pain has been described as a private and difficult to communicate experience. It has been said that pain diminishes the person's sense of self. *The International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP)* has defined pain as: "An unpleasant sensory and emotional experience ... associated with actual or potential tissue damage ... pain is ... always a psychological state even though ... pain ... has a ... physical cause." Therefore, pain is psychological as well as physical. In addition to pain itself, there is the suffering - the effect of the physical state on the person.

The highest quality of pain management occurs when the treatment is biopsychosocial. This means that in addition to biological factors, psychological and social ones are considered. The pain experience is one of perception – the sensation of tissue damage as well as thoughts and feelings about the sensation and the life situation. This is especially important to consider as patients with pain may develop psychological and social problems in addition to their physical pain. Such problems could be mood disorders, anxiety symptoms, illness preoccupation, trauma from the stress of the illness, problems with addiction, cognitive impairments and stress from losses and the need to make radical life changes. Negative thoughts and beliefs can develop due to these difficulties making the situation worse.

Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (CRPS) is a medical disorder which causes much suffering. Research has NOT concluded that patients who develop CRPS have had a prior psychological condition which led to this medical diagnosis. And, there is no specific personality type which develops CRPS. Anyone can have this happen to them. Medical science does not fully understand the risk factors of vulnerability involved. It is known however that CRPS causes psychological pain as well as physical pain.

It is worth noting that since many CRPS patients undergo the implantation of a spinal cord stimulation system, insurance coverage requires that the patient undergo a psychological evaluation prior to clearance for this intervention. As well, multidisciplinary treatment is the standard of care for CRPS therefore psychotherapy is included in that regimen.

Psychotherapy for pain management is a tool to help overcome problems. It provides a person the opportunity to discuss sensitive emotional concerns in a safe environment with the hope of change through understanding. There are different types of psychotherapy. Cognitive/behavioral and psychodynamic are two of those helpful to pain patients. Goals of pain psychotherapy are to understand how pain influences the person. In addition to individual psychotherapy, there are other applications – such as group, family, couples therapy as well as behavioral therapies such as neurofeedback and meditation which can be helpful to patients with CRPS related pain.

Research has shown that psychotherapy for patients with pain is beneficial. Unfortunately there is limited research on the specific case of patients with CRPS related pain but this will hopefully change in the near future.

Patients with pain need to learn how to live with pain and after effective treatments regain their position in the world. This can be a challenge after living with pain and suffering for a long period of time and enduring many losses and difficulties. Psychological treatments can add much to the overall treatment plan and add much relief to patients with CRPS.