

A Changing Relationship with Chronic Pain

According to the Chronic Pain Association of Canada (CPAC), 18% of Canadians suffer from chronic pain. Back pain, migraine, fibromyalgia, sciatica, and pelvic pain can all be devastating to individuals and families. CPAC estimates that the annual cost of chronic pain (including medical expenses, lost income, and lost productivity) exceeds 10 billion. This does not include the social costs. When chronic pain is a daily companion it is difficult to focus or concentrate, routine tasks become insurmountable obstacles, relationship strain often results, and lost wages can lead to financial devastation. Chronic pain also frequently carries a stigma, and misperceptions of a weak constitution continue to be prevalent. Whereas the cast that protects the broken bone alerts others to an injury, the invisibility of chronic pain is routinely overlooked and misunderstood. This can exacerbate stress and increase feelings of helplessness.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is an empirically based form of psychotherapy with demonstrated effectiveness for treating a variety of problems including chronic pain. ACT uses acceptance and mindfulness strategies, together with commitment and behaviour change to increase psychological flexibility. It is important to acknowledge that ACT does not promise to keep one from feeling pain. One of the principles of ACT is that it is normal to experience pain and even necessary for survival. Pain is often an important message from the body, signaling to the brain that something is wrong. The problem with chronic pain is that the pain signals never stop.

As humans we are conditioned to think that we need to avoid the pain experience. In their book on using ACT to ease chronic pain titled *Living Beyond Your Pain*, Dahl and Lundgren describe how most people with chronic pain alter their life in some way to accommodate their pain. Although this is done to avoid the experience of pain, avoidance of this nature causes suffering, which causes more pain and leads to more suffering. This can become an endless cycle from which escape seems impossible. One of the goals of ACT is to teach people how to break this cycle.

ACT draws a distinction between pain and suffering. There is a difference between avoiding dangerous events and avoiding feelings and thoughts about dangerous events. Avoiding danger is necessary for survival, but avoiding your mental and emotional reaction to danger can actually impair you further. Research has proven that avoiding a situation or numbing yourself to the associated feelings actually increases stress and makes you more mentally averse to the situation. When you don't accept feelings of frustration, disappointment, or anger that are elicited by the pain experience, pain turns into suffering. According to Dahl and Lundgren the complete manifestation of suffering in chronic pain usually happens in four steps:

- 1) Your actual physical pain sensation
- 2) The way your mind reacts to this pain
- 3) Avoidance or escape behaviours based on what your mind says
- 4) Long-term choices based on avoidance and escape behaviours

Often reminders are needed that it is okay to feel sad about being in pain, and okay to feel afraid when the body reacts. In ACT the reluctance to stay in contact with this type of suffering is called experiential avoidance. Avoidance behaviours can take on many forms including using medication to completely avoid pain rather than just dampen it enough to live.

If experiential avoidance is at the root of your suffering, its counterpart is acceptance. ACT does not just stand for Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, but for Accept, Choose, and Take action. Acceptance involves learning how to let go of the power struggle with pain. Although it is not an easy thing to do it is possible. Once you learn to let go, you are free to choose how you want to live. Dahl and Lundgren emphasize the importance of learning to choose the life you want rather than allowing pain to choose for you. Choosing the path of experiential avoidance may be less painful in the short term, but it will ultimately restrict life by limiting opportunities and experiences. Taking steps down a path that is meaningful is possible. It might mean bringing pain with you, but it may just be worth it if the alternative is a more confined life.