

Managing Never Ending Pain

"Pain is not just a physical sensation," says psychiatrist Jeff Ennis. "The physical sensation is coupled with an emotional response, and 99 per cent of the time it's a negative emotional response. This is a hardwired phenomenon. The pathways that carry the pain signals to the brain, also carry signals to the part of the brain that creates an emotional response to the physical sensation."

That's one reason why the innovative cognitive-behavioural program for chronic pain led by Dr. Ennis has made significant improvements in the quality of life of its patients.

"It's hard for a physician to say 'I have nothing more to offer.' But there comes a time when everything that can be done medically to treat the underlying pain problem has been done," says Ennis. "I'm the last guy that people want to see because typically they've already seen many physicians and they still have pain. I'm the guy who is going to try to help them cope with the pain, rather than cure it."

If one thinks about timelines, there are two types of pain. Acute pain can usually be diagnosed and treated, and is confined to a given period of time and severity. Eventually, it goes away. Chronic pain -- the kind of constant, daily pain that dominates your life for the worse -- persists and is resistant to most medical treatments. It carries a payload of depression, financial problems and challenging family issues. Chronic pain might reduce in intensity, but it does not go away.

Ennis says chronic pain can be terribly destructive. "...like the patient who spends 23 hours a day in bed, or the patient who wanted to have his legs amputated because he wanted to demonstrate to other people his terrible pain, or the patient whose pain drives him to violence. And yet patients are often told 'just to live with it, without a roadmap.'

"But that's nonsense," says Ennis whose intimate understanding comes from his own struggle with on going pain. "I don't want to live with pain at all. I don't want it as company; I don't want it as a friend; I don't want it as a relative. But as I can't do anything about it, I do want to get on with my life in spite of it."

EMP (the East End Multidisciplinary Pain Management Program) at St. Joseph's Healthcare Centre for Ambulatory Health Services is all about achieving personal best for each patient so that they can get on with their life.

Dr. Ennis is a member of The Canadian Pain Society Task Force that developed the national consensus statement and guidelines for the use of opioids in the treatment of non-cancer pain. He provides diagnostic, pharmacologic and non-pharmacologic treatment. Ennis and his multidisciplinary team -- including a social worker, physiotherapist, occupational therapist, a nutritionist, tai chi instructor and pool therapists -- conduct the eleven-week pain management program.

EMP provides over 100 hours of treatment utilizing a cognitive behavioural approach. The program focuses on a half-day group session with cognitive-behaviour therapy, education on a variety of topics such as understanding the neuroanatomy and neurophysiology of pain, medications, family challenges, fitness (tai chi and aqua therapy) and relaxation treatments.

Individualized programs may feature biofeedback and acupuncture. Family and marital therapy are available, as is nutritional counselling. Many patients, experience negative changes in eating habits and body image, and medication induced weight gain that can further impair their self-image and their ability to increase their level of function.

Physicians refer patients to the program, as do the WSIB, insurance providers, rehabilitation counsellors, other allied health service providers, lawyers and paralegal counsellors. EMP runs two group programs per year, through funding support from the HSO Mental Health and Nutrition Program. And some patients who can't otherwise afford to participate are subsidized.

"The objective of the program is not to reduce pain; if you leave the program with less pain that's a great side effect. What we expect to see is people leaving the program feeling better about themselves, able to do more and feel more fulfilled in their lives."