

Why Pain Management?

The term 'pain management' can mean anything from all the services delivered in a big hospital directed to helping people with pain, through to very much more specific psychological programmes aimed at helping people to deal with chronic pain.

In the context of this article I am going to use the phrase to mean a fixed length treatment programme delivered by an interdisciplinary team (usually physiotherapist, doctor, psychologist, nurse etc.) for the treatment of chronic pain. Programmes are usually given in a group format but sometimes they can be individualised.

Most people who have persistent pain will have been through a frustrating period when the symptoms do not settle down as they originally hoped they would. Usually people awaiting medical treatment or for an appointment for a scan are buoyed up by the notion that when they get the test, scan or therapy they will get better. However, all too often this optimism seems to have been misplaced and the pain persists in spite of everybody's best efforts.

Pain clinics provide the most common source of treatment for such persons and have a very wide range of therapies on offer. These include medications, injection techniques, stimulation, analgesics such as acupuncture and TENS, and physiotherapy. Most larger pain clinics also have a psychologist, as everyone agrees that pain can be very disruptive to mood, and psychological help and support can be of great value to those with persistent pain.

However, most comprehensive pain clinics also offer something which is usually termed a **pain management programme**. This comprises a fixed length treatment programme, of perhaps eight sessions, lasting most of the day, delivered over a two-month period. These programmes critically involve an interdisciplinary team and incorporate psychological techniques. These usually go under the name cognitive behavioural therapy abbreviated to CBT.

The aim of a pain management programme is not simply to help an individual cope with pain, many people find the pain does reduce in intensity or distress during the treatment. If one accepts the premise that pain has always a physical and a psychological component then reducing fear, distress and worry about the pain will inevitably reduce the amount of suffering experienced by the individual. If this can be combined with physical reactivation and improvement in function, then the effect can be even more marked.

Some pain management programmes are delivered in an intensive programme over four weeks with the individual attending every day. These programmes allow more focused therapy and seem to produce a bigger effect. There is no doubt, however, that outpatient programmes can be helpful, especially for people with less severe difficulties.

Whilst it might seem that the concept of a pain management programme – in essence to get back to doing things in spite of some pain, – is a much less attractive option than cure. It is undoubtedly a better option than no treatment, or fruitless wandering around the medical system expecting doctors to produce miracles when in fact there are none to be had. Furthermore research from a large number of research studies, all attest to the positive effects that can be generated by intensive programmes. Many people who have attended such programmes find it is the most useful treatment they have received.

In summary, pain management programmes are aimed to help the individual to understand their pain, overcome their fears concerning its cause or effect, and reduce the impact of the pain on their life. They take control of the pain rather than the other way around. Someone who is managing their pain well is keeping fit, is not resting excessively, is not unduly worried or depressed by the pain, is not taking excessive medications, is pacing their activities and keeping busy, is using relaxation to reduce the pain sensation and is not searching for miraculous cures that do not exist.

All people with persistent pain who find that it limits their function and affects their mood and motivation should attend a pain management programme. The majority will find it is much more effective than the invasive therapies that have not been proven to help and can do much harm.