

DON'T JOIN THE 50M CLUB

by Todd Fiorentino

CNN recently reported that an estimated 50 million people in the U.S. suffer from chronic pain. That's a whopping statistic if one really stops to consider the faces behind the numbers. Another indicator of the magnitude of this problem can be found by looking at 2003 sales of ibuprofen (Advil: 112.6M), acetaminophen (Tylenol: 141.1M), aspirin (Bayer: 49M) and over-the-counter anti-inflammatory drugs (Aleve: 60.7M) or stick-on heat/cold compresses (ThermaCare: 26.5M)*.

Unfortunately, many people simply learn to endure pain as opposed to taking action to eliminate it. They feel hopeless and the pain in turn affects their psychological state sometimes leading to depression. Alternative or holistic medicine addresses the mind-body connection seeking to treat the entire individual as opposed to just the problem area. This approach is based on the idea that our thoughts and feelings can contribute to or hinder our healing.

Remarkably, studies have shown that how confident a doctor appears when administering a given treatment, even a placebo, can affect the outcome. Here's another example: The thought or fear that "I may never get better" can actually prevent you from improving. Now let's say that I replaced that thought with "This is a short-term problem." While this may sound like a basic exercise in positive thinking, it is useful and true in many cases—muscular spasm, for instance, rarely continues for more than six or eight months.

Muscular problems are often neuromuscular in nature, that is, they stem from nervous (system) energy traveling at the wrong rate through nerve pathways in the body. Those pathways originate from the brain and so your thoughts and feelings can affect those signals. The idea here is not to be in denial about a condition. Many conditions require medical intervention while others require *your* intervention.

We need to empower ourselves and take back control of our own care. Taking the time to learn about a given condition is the first step in this process. It will remove the anxiety associated with not understanding what a doctor or practitioner is doing. Also, you know which questions to ask when selecting a modality or route to your healing. Find someone who you are comfortable with and test their knowledge. Make sure they are a good communicator.

Western medicine has made great strides but people continue to feel alienated from their own care. We submit to the doctor's orders because he/she is the expert. Increasingly, we are seeking technological fixes to our health problems, which says a lot about how we perceive ourselves in the world in the 20th Century. These technological fixes (e.g. high-tech drugs) represent important gains but they also present choices.

What if we come to rely on drugs instead of choosing to lead a healthy lifestyle? That is, you can take these blood pressure medicines or you could exercise more... Well, let's just take the drugs. Or, you can artificially boost your serotonin level by taking Paxil or you can release endorphins via massage or exercise. What will you choose?

Sometimes a lifestyle change is all that's needed. Other times, people need the drugs and a lifestyle change. But one thing is for sure, if you are unhappy, this will manifest itself through your body. When so many people work desk jobs and sit all day, sometimes it is difficult to make these lifestyle changes. But it is necessary if you want to get rid of back pain, for instance.

Although it sounds counter-intuitive, when your muscles are tightening up and your body is guarding, this is the time when you really should use those muscles. Stretch out, exercise, get

a massage, but don't let your body continue in this guarding process. If your muscles start to spasm, recognize that this is almost always short-term.

Just like pain, muscular spasm is a way for your body to signal that there is a problem that needs attention. Thank goodness for pain and spasm. Otherwise, we wouldn't even know there was a problem that needed to be alleviated. The 50M Club is growing every day. The best way to make sure and not join is by doing preventative exercises, stretches and getting a massage once or twice a month.

If you wait, and a problem sets up, it gets harder for therapists to unwind those tangled muscle fibers and connective tissue. The massage will be more painful (some call this "good pain" however) and you will actually need an intervention at that point with frequent visits. If you come in periodically, you will enjoy the sessions more and that club membership I mentioned, well, chances are it will expire.

* Source: Information Resources Inc., statistics are for the 52 week period ending Dec. 29 of 2003.