Anxiety: A Surprising Cause and Effect of Back Pain

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The Connection Between Anxiety and Back Pain

When back pain is in full force, it can make any activity or movement painful, agonizing and frustrating. Even laying down in bed can induce a level of misery and suffering. When anxiety is high, it can make any daily activity a source of intense stress and worry. The fear and uncertainty of anxiety can imprison a person inside their own home or mind, which makes it impossible to work, go to school, eat well, exercise, or even take care of their most basic needs. On the outside, it may seem like there is no connection between a physical health condition, like back pain, and a mental health condition, like anxiety. In reality, the connection is strong and bidirectional. So, what is the relationship between anxiety and back pain?

Breaking Down Back Pain

People often think about back pain being caused by sudden and damaging physical trauma, but quite often back pain comes from overuse, normal wear-and-tear, or an inadvertent minor injury due to a mistimed movement. Once symptoms begin, it can be challenging to effectively treat and repair the subsequent damage.

The nagging and lingering pain in the back can limit a person’s abilities and movements, affecting their daily routines, work, finances and social relationships. Once life is disrupted to this degree, stress, frustration, sadness and anger are common repercussions.

Inspecting the Role of Anxiety

Hearing about anxiety usually makes people think of the common mental health symptoms of condition. With anxiety, a person may experience an array of unwanted psychological effects:

- Intense worry
- Nervousness
- Extreme fear
- Panic attacks
- Feeling out of control
- Irritability
- Fear of dying

Although these symptoms are common, a range of physical health effects are also linked to anxiety:

- Pounding heart
- Shakiness and trembling
- Chest pain
- Nausea
- Feeling dizzy

- Feeling numb or tingling sensations

Depending on the type of anxiety, some or all of these symptoms can present frequently and intensely. Some symptoms will have obvious triggers and others will emerge without warning.

The Anxiety and Back Pain Connection

The above symptoms of anxiety are common but another effect of anxiety ties in directly to back pain – physical tension. The physical tension of anxiety can cause tightness in a person's jaw, neck and back.

With this tension in these vulnerable areas, the person is at greater risk of injury from everyday actions. When anxiety weakens the back, one wrong move, twist, reach, bend, or lift can be enough to cause irreversible damage.

As mentioned, the relationship between anxiety and back pain is bidirectional, which means anxiety triggers back pain, but back pain also triggers anxiety. When someone must manage the discomfort of back pain on a regular basis, anxiety will be a natural consequence. Of course, more anxiety leads to more tension and a greater risk of more back pain. Sadly, the cycle repeats.

Ways to Manage

Back pain and anxiety may seem like an unstoppable combination that is only concerned with causing harm to a person's life. The process is challenging, but with a concerted effort focused on improving a person's mental and physical health, progress will be made.

Relaxation Techniques

To begin, people should take a serious step towards managing their anxious symptoms, and relaxation techniques are a wonderful way to achieve this. Relaxation techniques are broad and include options like deep breathing, visualization and autogenic training. Perhaps the most effective technique for back pain is progressive muscle relaxation, where the person tightens and relaxes muscles all over their body to reduce the tension. Just a few minutes each day can make a significant difference.

Yoga

Few activities offer the combined positive effects on mental and physical health of yoga. Research shows that people who engage in the practice of yoga regularly are physically healthier and less stressed compared to those who do not. Certainly, no one is suggesting that a person jumps into complicated techniques or poses, but even simple postures and movements can make wanted changes a reality. Check out our blog post on the best yoga positions for back pain.

Mental Health Therapy

Seeking therapy for back pain may seem like an odd decision on the surface, but it could be a great way to improve symptoms of pain and anxiety simultaneously. Speaking with a therapist can help reduce the underlying source of anxiety, as well as moving towards feelings of hope and acceptance connected to the back pain. By embracing the limitations of back pain, a person can reduce the anger, frustration and sadness associated with their physical health.

Keep in Mind

Along the way, a person with back pain should always consult with their primary care doctor and other physicians to explore effective treatment options, but people should beware of treatments that only cover up the pain. Always seek out solutions.