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Chronic Pain: An Alarm System Gone Wrong

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In the last article on pain, we saw how trigger points can mimic more serious conditions. In this article, let's examine how chronic pain is different than acute pain and why that is important.

In acute pain, the pain is a warning sign to limit activity and prevent further injury. In chronic pain, the problem is the pain message itself. In the last article, I referred to a faulty alarm system. Let's continue this analogy with chronic pain.

More than once, I have hurriedly entered my office with too many things in my hands. Punching in the alarm code incorrectly, I now hear the tell-tale high-pitched buzz that means I have put in the wrong numbers. Realizing my mistake, I try to punch in the right numbers, but it adds the new numbers to the sequence I already punched in (since I cannot remember how to clear the system) and now my entry is way off. At this point, the siren comes on, so loud that I think I may have awakened half the city. When that siren is going off, not only can I not remember the correct code, I don't think I could remember my name. As I move to set down my armloads of stuff, the motion sensors confirm that indeed a thief (me) is in the building. This is going from bad to worse. . .

The message of pain is very similar to that alarm system. Initially, the message may have value when the pain is acute and rest or limitation of movement is necessary. If the signal continues for too long, it is like the siren going off; I know there is a problem but the noise from the siren isn't helping! It actually makes the problem worse.

There is one major difference in the alarm system analogy. In my office alarm system, the sensitivity stays constant. In the body, once pain is experienced, the perimeter alarms become super-sensitized to any stimuli, even ones that are not normally painful. The tissue responds to normal movement and stress as though it were a problem, like a motion sensor that has increased its sensitivity so that the movement of plant leaves from a draft can be detected. Heightened perimeter sensitivity creates more input to central control (the brain) who now thinks that the body is under siege. Both the central response and the periphery reinforce each other, but the stimulus that started it all may not even exist anymore. It is a system out of control.

It is for this reason that pain must be addressed early, before it escalates or gets entrenched. Waiting has no value. The longer pain goes on, the more out of balance the system can get. Keep exploring different strategies, keep moving, and keep searching for what works for you.