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Patient Attitudes on Alternative Pain Management Approaches

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Abstract

The topic of chronic pain and pain management continues to be heavily discussed by healthcare providers today. In the state of Maine, the recent limit on Opioid prescriptions raised questions regarding sustainable and alternative, long-term treatment options for patients. Many patients suffering from chronic pain are now tapering off their prescriptions and seeking alternative treatment options such as acupuncture, herbal remedies/supplements, massage, mind-body techniques, and yoga. This qualitative study was designed to explore patients attitudes on alternative treatment approaches. Seven individuals who suffer from chronic pain participated in interviews exploring their journey toward pain relief. The findings from this study were analyzed using thematic analysis, with a focus on identifying themes related to attitudes and experiences with alternative approaches. This study offers valuable information to build and inform healthcare professionals knowledge of what treatment options their patients find most effective, as well as offers potentially helpful information for other chronic pain sufferers seeking treatment.

Introduction

There are an estimated 100 million adults in this country suffering from chronic pain (Becker, 2013). Aside from the personal cost to the individual suffering from pain, chronic pain has been estimated to cost the country over \$300 million in lost productivity alone (Gaskin & Richard, 2012). Pain represents a significant public health concern and challenge in our society. In the state of Maine, the recent legal limit on Opioid prescriptions due to the risks of misuse and addiction has shifted chronic pain sufferers treatment options. With this shift, examining the attitudes of those suffering from chronic pain and their alternative choice for management long-term is an essential step in offering future support to pain sufferers.

Research Question

What are the attitudes and experiences of chronic pain sufferers regarding alternative pain management approaches ?

Methods

- Qualitative thematic analysis.
- Recruitment took place at community health centers offering alternative therapies for chronic pain.
- Participants were selected by purposive and snowball sampling.
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted .Each interview was audio recorded and lasted an average of 19 minutes, with a range of 10 to 42 minutes.
- All participants suffered from chronic pain (pain lasting longer than 12 weeks.)
- Four women and three men participated.
- Age range: 25 – 65 years.

Theme 1: Sustainability

“Honestly, I don’t know there’s always this fear, because my pain gets worse every year and I just find different coping mechanisms ” (Interviewee 1).
“I’m gonna keep getting older and it’ll keep getting worse... I’m gonna need to get professional help” (Interviewee 6).

Theme 2: Effectiveness

“The cannabis has allowed me to actually be able to sleep through the night” (Interviewee 3).
“The acupuncture has always helped, almost immediately, and the homeopathic remedies are really amazing how they work for me” (Interviewee 2).

Theme 3: Barriers to Access

“The acupuncture is sustainable because I have insurance that covers a majority of it, it covers 50%” (Interviewee 2).
“Of course because acupuncture isn’t covered by my insurance there are financial issues” (Interviewee 5).
“I definitely consider finances to be preventing me from seeking out the PT that I would like to get” (Interviewee 6).

Theme 4: Acceptance

“Pain has become something I manage with everyday, so I have learned to accept it. But I will not let it define or limit me” (Interviewee 5).
“If you wanna let the pain beat you up and take you down and take you out then that’s gonna happen...I’m not gonna let that happen. I deal with it, I confront it so I can't live a good life” (Interviewee 7).

Figure 1. Emerging Themes

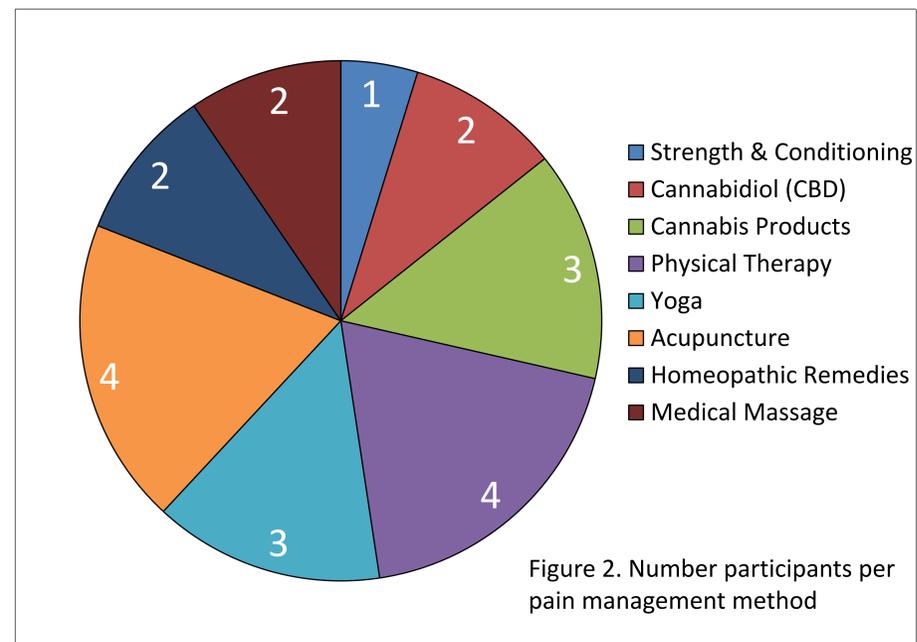


Figure 2. Number participants per pain management method

Results

Figure 1 identifies four emerging themes in participant responses through data analysis: 1) Sustainability; 2) Barriers to access; 3) Effectiveness; and 4) Acceptance.

Figure 2 identifies the number of participants per pain management method. The therapies utilized by participants were: strength & conditioning, cannabidiol (CBD), cannabis products, physical therapy, yoga, acupuncture, homeopathic remedies, and medical massage. Most participants utilized more than one alternative pain management method.

These findings suggest that the journey toward pain relief is not straight forward. Many participants simultaneously reported satisfaction with their pain management methods, but expressed concerns relating to long-term sustainability. Many participants found their treatment method to be effective, but encountered challenging financial barriers precluding them from consistent access. Most importantly, participants accept that their pain may not be curable and instead focus on managing their pain to maximize their quality of life.

Discussion

Prior literature discussing patient attitudes on alternative methods for chronic pain management is relatively sparse. Typically, studies on alternative pain management focus on evaluating therapy efficacy. This study, although limited in sample size, examines the patient perspective on alternative methods that is unrepresented in the wider literature.

The findings from this study offer healthcare providers and potentially other chronic pain sufferers further insight into the journey toward pain relief. Overall, patients’ attitudes towards their pain management approaches were overwhelmingly positive. Most participants reported trying a number of methods, but ultimately selected one or two that were most beneficial. Unfortunately, financial barriers to access and fears of worsening pain symptoms often complicated the pain management process.

Based on the themes presented in this study, alternative pain management approaches can be effective. The common frustration identified around barriers indicates that making alternative pain management therapies available to chronic pain sufferers should be a priority for healthcare institutions. In the context of the ongoing opioid crisis, ensuring the accessibility and sustainability of treatment is crucial.

Acknowledgements

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