

Psychological treatments improve outcomes for back pain sufferers

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"The paradox is that, despite data on the effectiveness of psychological interventions, insurers are less willing to pay for them."

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Psychological interventions for chronic low back pain are effective, a new review of studies has found. Not only do these approaches improve psychological outcomes such as depression and health-related quality of life, they also reduce patients' experience of pain.

"Because this analysis was both more inclusive and more conservative than previous reviews, we have the best evidence to date that these interventions are helpful," said psychologist and review lead author Robert Kerns, Ph.D., of the VA Connecticut Healthcare System.

The review, part of a new article series, appears in the January issue of the journal *Health Psychology*. Each evidence-based review centers on a specific psychological assessment or treatment conducted in the context of a physical disease process or risk reduction effort.

To evaluate the effects of psychological interventions on pain-related outcomes, Kerns and his team gathered data from 22 randomized trials published between 1982 and 2003. Trials were limited to adults with nonmalignant low back pain that had persisted for at least three months. However, most patients had been living with pain for much longer. The average duration was seven and a half years.

The studies were not limited to any one psychological approach. Included in the review were behavioral and cognitive-behavioral techniques; self-regulatory techniques such as hypnosis, biofeedback, and relaxation; and supportive counseling.

The review reports on 12 pain-related outcomes, including pain

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intensity, pain interference, depression, health care use, disability and health-related quality of life.

In the broadest analysis, psychological interventions — alone or as part of a multidisciplinary approach — proved to be superior to waiting lists or standard treatments on the entire range of pain-related outcomes.

When the researchers analyzed specific outcomes, they found that the largest and most consistent