

Effective Psychotherapies for Pain Control

*Medication is not the only option for managing pain.
Many psychotherapies are also effective for controlling pain.*

Ask your VA Healthcare Provider about these treatment options:

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

In this treatment you work with a therapist to **accept** thoughts, emotions, and pain sensations while also working on living life in a way that reflects your personal values. ACT directly explores quality of life issues by helping you identify your personal values and working with you to make choices that are consistent with those values. The work done in ACT is designed to help you stop avoiding the experience of pain so that you can live a more vital and valuable life. While this therapy focuses less on symptom reduction than many other therapies, symptom reduction is often reported after the treatment is completed.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

The goal of CBT is to help you to reduce the severity of your pain by changing your pain-related thoughts and behaviors. For example, a therapist might help you notice when you are having negative thoughts about your pain (This pain is going to kill me! I am useless because of the pain! I can't cope with this pain!) and help you swap those thoughts with more helpful and truthful thoughts (This is hard, but I can make it! There are still lots of things I can enjoy). You may also learn more ways of coping with your pain. Relaxation exercises can help decrease muscle tension, reduce distress, and help keep your mind off your pain. Training in pleasant imagery and counting methods can help you experience less pain. You may also learn problem solving methods to help you develop plans for dealing with pain flares and other challenging situations.

Graded Exercise Therapy

Veterans with chronic pain often avoid exercise or physical activity for fear of increasing pain or getting injured again. Unfortunately, avoiding physical activity makes your body grow weaker and makes your pain worse. One way to restart a program of exercise or physical activity is Graded Exercise Therapy. With the help of a psychologist or physical therapist, you can begin to exercise slowly and in very small steps. The key is to plan a program that you can stay with even if you feel like you can't do much. Increasing exercise very slowly helps your body adjust to more physical activity. For example, you may plan a walking program for 5 minutes every other day for 2 weeks. After 2 weeks, you can increase the time you walk to 7 minutes each time. By increasing exercise in small steps your body will begin to feel stronger and you will feel successful and more in control of your pain.