Laura Katz hopes her research will identify self-regulation strategies that lead to better coping and wellbeing in patients with IC/BPS.

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Photo by Eric Brousseau

The biopsychosocial model for treating chronic illness is currently the gold standard, yet it is widely unavailable within our current health care system. Clinical Psychology PhD Candidate Laura Katz’s research focuses on examining the psychosocial factors of chronic illness, and more specifically on understanding the mechanisms of coping within Interstitial Cystitis/Bladder Pain Syndrome (IC/BPS).

IC/BPS is a chronic pelvic pain condition characterized primarily by pain, along with urinary urgency and urinary frequency that affects approximately 3-6% of North American women, with a lesser number of men. Individuals diagnosed with IC/BPS report depression, poor quality of life, sleep dysfunction, anxiety, stress, and sexual/social functioning problems.

“Medical treatments are mostly ineffective and are usually associated with temporary relief,” Laura says. “Psychology plays a significant role in the treatment of IC/BPS, since treatments involving pain and symptom management and adaptive coping mechanisms are associated with better patient outcomes.”

Laura’s research investigates self-regulation models for women suffering from IC/BPS, with two main objectives. Firstly, she is collecting data internationally using questionnaires to understand women’s experiences in coping with IC/BPS. Her line of research examines factors such as symptoms, pain, illness perceptions, emotion regulation, cognitive/behavioural coping, and outcomes such as depression, disability and quality of life. Laura is one of the first researchers to examine illness perceptions in individuals with IC/BPS.

“Illness perceptions help us understand how women with IC/BPS conceptualize and interpret their illness,” Laura explains. “More specifically, these internal representations show how individuals make
sense of and cope with their illness. For example, individuals who perceive their illness to have a large emotional impact, or who have a low sense of control over their illness are more likely to appraise their situation as a threat accompanied by the evaluation of poor personal resources to cope with the situation. The combination of these appraisal processes leads to poor patient outcomes. Illness perceptions are significant in that they may be a precursor to outcomes such as depression, and as such provide insights for helping patients within a therapeutic process.

Her second objective is to evaluate all of these factors simultaneously within a larger self-regulation model. Using this modeling approach allows for evaluation of all of these constructs together as in a real-world perspective.

“My hopes are that the results from this research will identify self-regulation strategies that lead to better coping and wellbeing in patients with IC/BPS. Future studies will build upon these findings to develop psychosocial interventions aimed at managing chronic pain and improving quality of life.”

Laura conducts her research in the Pain Research Lab at Queen’s Psychology under the supervision of Dr. Dean A. Tripp. “This is my optimal training environment! Dr. Tripp and the lab have well established the link between psychological and social factors in the management of chronic pain and disease, which paves the way for my research”, Laura says. “The lab is incredibly supportive, and collegial and we have opportunities to work in health conditions in Urology, Anesthesia and GI, as well as with international colleagues.”

Looking to the future, Laura wishes to continue her work by developing and implementing empirically based psychological treatments within a health-care setting. “My plan is to work as a clinical psychologist within a multidisciplinary team helping individuals cope with chronic pain and chronic illness”, she says. “My research creates a background for me to develop and test novel psychological treatments to teach individual’s to use more adaptive coping, help to improve their quality of life and encourage them to re-engage in meaningful areas of life.”