Understanding how the role of thoughts, behaviours, and emotions can affect a chronic pain condition

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By Queen’s Psychology
Photo by Eric Brousseau

Queen’s Psychology’s Abi Muere studies chronic pain and how thoughts, behaviours, and emotions affect chronic pain.

“After getting my Bachelor of Science degree from the University of Toronto, I worked for two years as an assistant to a clinical psychologist who assessed individuals involved in motor vehicle accidents,” Abi recalls. “Almost all of the patients complained of chronic pain. However, there didn’t seem to be a clear linear relationship between the severity of the collision and their current degree of pain.” She adds that some individuals involved in horrific car crashes reported minimal pain and no psychological symptoms post-accident, while others would develop chronic back and neck pain and post-traumatic symptoms following minor fender benders. This led Abi to become interested in the role of psychosocial factors in chronic pain, and to the Pain Research Lab at Queen’s Psychology.

Abi chose the Clinical Psychology program at Queen’s University based on the strong clinical training offered by the program and the very interesting research being conducted by Dr. Dean Tripp and the Pain Research Lab. She is currently completing the first year of her PhD studies.

“It was important for me to choose a program that balanced my development as a clinician and as a scientist,” Abi says. “I felt that my research and clinical interests in health psychology and chronic pain fit well with the research being conducted by Dr. Tripp and the Pain Research Lab.

In recent years, Dr. Tripp’s research has examined how psychological factors such as depression and pain catastrophizing can affect a patient’s quality of life, even after considering the effect of chronic pain.
Describing the working and learning environment of the Pain Research Lab, Abi says, “Dr. Tripp challenges his graduate students to be innovative pain researchers. It is often very difficult for psychological research on pain to be recognized and used by the medical community so he is constantly encouraging his students to take on the role of pioneers in our field and really push for recognition within the healthcare system. To this end, Dr. Tripp provides his students with many opportunities to collaborate with clinicians working in Urology, Anesthesia, and GI, both nationally and internationally.”

For her Master's thesis, Abi modelled the relationships between three psychosocial factors known to influence pain related to Interstitial Cystitis/Bladder Pain Syndrome (IC/BPS). IC/BPS is a chronic pelvic pain syndrome characterized by pain in the bladder, as well as urological symptoms (e.g., excessively frequent urination, painful voiding, etc.). She investigated the effects of catastrophizing, behavioural coping strategies, and depression on IC/BPS because she wanted to understand how the role of thoughts, behaviours, and emotions can affect a chronic pain condition. “Abi’s passion for helping people is deep, and her resolve is strong,” says Abi's supervisor, Dr. Tripp. "She uses these aspects of herself to push her research agenda."

Statistics have shown that prevalence rates for IC/BPS have ranged from 2.7%-6.5% in the general female population (Clemens et al., 2005; Nickel, Teichman, Gregoire, Clark, & Downey, 2005). The overwhelming majority of IC/BPS patients are women and there is debate among urologists whether men with IC/BPS should actually be diagnosed and treated as having chronic prostatitis, a male-only chronic pelvic pain syndrome.

“My research is focused on women suffering from IC/BPS. While these women all suffer from chronic pelvic pain, there is considerable variability in their quality of life, presence of other health conditions, severity of pain, and methods of coping,” Abi explains. “Additionally, though the majority of my study’s participants are North American, I believe that a lot of the findings can be applicable to an international IC/BPS patient population. From a broader perspective, I think my research is relevant to all individuals who suffer from chronic pain as many of the recommendations born from my research can be applied to other chronic pain conditions.”

Abi hopes that the results from her study will highlight the need to identify and target maladaptive ways of appraising and coping with pain related to IC/BPS. She would like to see techniques based on cognitive-behavioural and mindfulness-based therapies for pain developed and recommended in clinical practice. These psychotherapeutic techniques challenge catastrophizing thoughts and promote more adaptive ways of coping with pain.

“At the present time, there is no consensus in the scientific community on the cause of IC/BPS or a gold-standard treatment for it,” Abi concludes. “The cause, and therefore treatment, of IC/BPS is still not well understood. So one of my goals is to identify factors that can improve current pain management programs.”

"Abi cares for people and wants to have answers for important questions of patient focused treatment," adds Dr. Tripp. "Her work is important and will change the lives of patients in pain."

Abi has received Ontario Graduate Scholarships as well as a CIHR Health Professional Student Research Award to help fund her research. She hopes to work as a clinical psychologist as part of a multidisciplinary team working with individuals suffering from chronic pain and/or disabilities.

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