

PTSD Bytes Transcript

Episode #:	43
Topic:	PTSD and Chronic Pain
Guest:	Jennifer Murphy, PhD Katherine Hadlandsmyth, PhD
Working title:	PTSD and Chronic Pain

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Welcome to the PTSD Bytes podcast, where we talk to experts about post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health, and how technology like mobile mental health apps can help. This is your host, Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport, clinical psychologist at the Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD.

On today's episode, we'll be talking about PTSD and pain. I'm joined by Dr. Jennifer Murphy and Dr. Katie Hadlandsmyth. Dr. Murphy is a clinical psychologist and national director of the VA's Pain Management Program. She's also a subject matter expert and lead author for the VA's Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Chronic Pain Initiative. Dr. Hadlandsmyth is a clinical pain psychologist and health services researcher at the Iowa City VA and the University of Iowa. Welcome, Dr. Murphy and Dr. Hadlandsmyth.

Dr. Katherine Hadlandsmyth:

Thanks for having us today.

Dr. Jennifer Murphy:

Yes, thanks. We're so happy to be here.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

I think it's important we establish early on in the episode the difference between chronic and acute pain. So, can you tell us how is chronic pain defined and how might it be different from more acute pain?

Dr. Jennifer Murphy:

Yeah, so that's a great question. Acute pain is really the kind of pain that we think of most typically in our culture, right? Something happens, you burn your hand, break your leg. There's an event that occurs. We go to the doctor, and we have it diagnosed and treated. So acute pain is short term, and it typically would resolve within a few months. Chronic pain on the other hand, lasts longer than three months and that can certainly be more like years or decades. We have many people in the VA who have had pain for, for 20, 30 years, but chronic pain is this very common condition, it's one in about four people in the US has chronic pain. And so, it's something that that many people are, are living with every day and it's even more common in the veteran population.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Thank you for clarifying that. Now, I can imagine that some people may be a little confused about why psychologists are joining us today to talk about pain because it's oftentimes thought of as a medical issue. How can pain psychologists help someone with chronic pain?

Dr. Jennifer Murphy:

So, pain is very complex, and it affects things like our families, our mood, the activities that we're able to engage in. And so, a pain psychologist is really somebody who spends a lot of time, one, listening to the person with pain and providing really some education about what pain is, what it isn't, and the ways that we can respond to pain that may be more helpful to us. So, for example, one common thing is, you know, avoiding activity because when things hurt it makes sense to avoid, right? But actually, with chronic pain, avoiding is something that is counterproductive. It can actually make us experience greater pain in the long run, be more susceptible to injury, things along that line. So, we really cover a lot of ground, but it's about addressing all of these different aspects so that really the individual with pain can have a better quality of life through a better understanding of their own pain and what they can do to manage it most effectively and live the best life possible.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Well, and obviously this is a podcast about PTSD, so now I'm wondering what is the relationship between PTSD and chronic pain? Are people with PTSD more likely to experience chronic pain?

Dr. Katherine Hadlandsmyth:

So, the short answer is yes. We know that first of all, 50% of veterans with PTSD also have chronic pain. So, a lot of the individuals we're seeing with PTSD have chronic pain as well. And we know that the development of pain can be affected by a trauma history. So, for example, in children who are exposed to trauma, they develop their pain sensors differently, their central nervous system actually develops differently to be highly tuned in to perceiving pain. And this is a risk factor for developing chronic pain in adulthood. Then we also know that in adults there's been some really interesting research from whiplash injury that those after a whiplash car accident basically and have initial symptoms of whiplash, those who start to have trauma related symptoms are much more likely to develop chronic pain. So, there are these ways in which symptoms of PTSD and chronic pain can really magnify one another and it becomes one of these situations where the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

I think another thing that's particularly difficult about PTSD is that the wounds are invisible to the outside world. So, people living with PTSD often say that people treat them as if they're exaggerating or making it up, and that's incredibly hurtful and invalidating. Would you say that's also the case with chronic pain?

Dr. Jennifer Murphy:

This is an incredibly common experience for those with chronic pain. It's something that you hear over and over again. Oftentimes those with chronic pain do not feel heard or believed. Often people feel like they're walking around, and they may look fine, but they're really not fine. So for those with pain, this idea that it's all in my head is challenging and creates, creates a significant issue for many of those who experience pain.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

The other thing I've heard is that when we talk about living with pain or improving life despite pain, some people feel like their medical team has given up on trying to reduce or eliminate their pain, and then therapy is something that's offered when there's nothing more they can do. So, what would you say to people who feel that way?

Dr. Jennifer Murphy:

Right? This is very common for sure and it's actually quite the opposite. In VA, we really emphasize our ability to work as a team. And we're really fortunate to be able to have people from physicians, physical therapists, psychologists, whole health coaches, pharmacists, we're able to work in a very interdisciplinary way to help individuals with pain. And one, the psychologist is an incredibly important team person on this team. Working with the pain psychologist to grow our lives figure out how to live our best lives despite pain is actually something that is one of the best things that we can do. And it's actually a way to really empower the individual so they don't feel that loss of control or that helplessness that we see. A lot of times when people may be dissatisfied, of course with the pain that they're experiencing, it's actually a great way to listen to their story, what motivates them, and then talk about how can we get you where you want to go? How can we sort of improve the skills and strategies that we have to approach pain at this point and how can we get you closer to living the life that you want to have if you're not in that situation right now.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

I love that you talked about empowering people because I think there's so much powerlessness with both chronic pain and PTSD. Can you speak a little bit more about current treatment recommendations for people with PTSD and chronic pain? Is each issue treated separately or are they generally treated together?

Dr. Katherine Hadlandsmyth:

Probably the most common model in healthcare, is parallel where people are getting their PTSD treatment through mental health and their pain care through either primary care or specialty pain clinics or rehabilitative services. And the parallel model is probably more and less effective depending on the level of coordination between the different services. And then we have this idea of combined treatment models where someone can go one place either to a single provider or to a team and get both their chronic pain and PTSD treated simultaneously. Of course, within the VA there's more and more movement towards combined approaches through primary care, mental health integration through the whole health model. What we can really emphasize is that care coordination seems to be really key.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And outside of treatment, are there things that people can do on their own to manage pain and PTSD symptoms?

Dr. Jennifer Murphy:

I think this is where a lot of good news and hope comes in. A lot of the non-pharmacological approaches that we have especially are really geared towards empowering individuals with skills strategy, helping them walk through their lives and sort of achieve their goals and provide them with ideas for how to make changes that they are desiring. And a way to do that despite the pain. One thing that we are so excited about is our Pain Coach app. It was developed by the National Center for PTSD and is a wonderful offering for self-managing pain. It has a lot of great videos and other information, a broad range of tools to help with pain management as well as those many areas that are affected such as falling asleep. It addresses activity, pacing, relaxation techniques. In addition to that, it has daily check-ins so you can sort of say, this is how I'm feeling today and that really links with a customization for what might be most helpful for you right now in the app. So, it's really wonderful and we're really excited

about that as something that can be an immediate tool for those inside and outside of VA to help with self-management of pain and PTSD symptoms.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Well, unfortunately that is all the time we have for today. Thank you so much for joining us, Dr. Murphy and Dr. Hadlandsmyth.

Dr. Jennifer Murphy:

Thank you for having us.

Dr. Katherine Hadlandsmyth:

Yeah, thank you so much for this opportunity. We really appreciate it.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

As a reminder to our listeners, pain Coach is a free app that can be downloaded by anyone, not just veterans. To download the app, search Pain Coach in the App store or Google play.

Dr. Andrea Jamison:

Hello, this is Andrea Jamison and I'm the executive producer of the PTSD Bytes podcast. Catch new episodes by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Show notes and more information are on our website, www.p.va.gov/podcast. Thank you for joining us.