Coaching Clients with Chronic Back Pain

Mary Williams, MSEd, CPE
Founder, BACKCoach™
Certified Wellness Coach, Professional Ergonomist
Speaker, Author, Trainer

Web Site:  www.BACKCoach.net
Email:  Mary.Williams@BACKCoach.net
Phone:  601-583-4695

Three main concepts:

1. Why BACKCoaching™? How it is different than general wellness coaching? What are the special needs of people with chronic back pain?
2. What is the primary mechanism involved in back pain? What are the Cycle of Pain and the Cycle of Recovery?
3. What wellness principles can be applied to people with chronic back pain?

Why BACKCoaching™?

Wellness coaching for people with chronic low back pain can be extremely beneficial for the following reasons.

People with chronic low back pain may

- Not understand why their back hurts
- Have many false beliefs about the nature of back pain
- Believe that they are “damaged” and that they need to “protect” themselves
- Live with a list of things that they “can’t” do
- Not ever have talked about how they feel about what is happening with their back and how it has affected their lives
- Come to you with a list of modifications, adjustments and adaptations/devices
- Be depressed or angry

BACKCoaching can help by

- providing information to help the client understand what is going on with their backs – very important
- helping clients regain confidence that they can do anything that they wish to do
• walk the client through the process of making the lifestyle changes that can help them to relieve symptoms and restore activities

Differences between BACKCoaching and general wellness coaching

• In BACKCoaching™, you will need to be more of an expert, especially in the early stages. Information plays a larger role than in general wellness coaching because conveying information and clearing up misconceptions is the critical first step in recovery
• Progress may occur more slowly if there has been a prolonged period of inactivity
• Clients may bring entrenched limiting beliefs and labels, and have very low self-efficacy

Back Pain, The Cycle of Pain and the Cycle of Recovery

Background Information

Did you know that
• 99.5% of back pain is muscular in nature?
• Back pain in our country has increased as our activity level went down (automation), our postures changed and our stress levels rose?
• People in other “primitive” cultures have virtually no back pain?

Background Studies

• 64% of people without any back pain show abnormal disks on their MRIs
• Many people with back pain have normal MRI test results
  → There is no consistent relationship between disk state and pain level
• Many people continue to have back pain after “successful” surgery to correct the abnormality
• 50% of people who had exploratory surgery (before MRIs) with no defects who were sewed up were completely relieved of pain
  → There is no consistent relationship between back surgery and relief of pain
• Chronic, disabling LBP occurs mostly in countries with high psychological stress, low physical stress and misaligned postures
• Rates of back pain are lowest in rural areas and poor countries

A couple more...

• Most people get better in a few days or weeks, regardless of what they do!
• Thinking that you’ll be helped can make you feel better
• Boeing Study
• Most people with chronic back pain were under a great deal of stress when the “triggering event” occurred

The Cycle of Pain

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Cycle of Pain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Triggering event causes back muscles to tighten</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Negative thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ “Protecting” the back, i.e., reduced physical activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ More pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Negative emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Increased stress and tension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Increased pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etc, etc., including validation that something “serious” must be wrong!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Primary contributing factors

1. Stress
2. Inadequate activity
3. Postural imbalance

Other contributing factors

1. Ergonomic arrangement of workplace and home
2. Nutrition
3. Low self-care

Client factors

1. The belief that they are “damaged”
2. The belief that they need to “protect” themselves
3. Negative messages, such as having a “bad back” or their back “went/goes out”
4. Reduction in stress-relieving activities
5. Reinforcing examples, such as speed bump
### The Cycle of Recovery

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understand the nature of chronic back pain and its underlying causes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>→ Begin physical activity and stress management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Positive thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Reduced pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ More exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Address stressors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Postural balance training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Positive emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>→ Reduced pain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Etc, etc.... with increased self-efficacy, return to activities, stress management and postural balance training....

→ Leading to a full recovery and a life without restrictions

### Further considerations

- Understand that most back pain is due to tight back muscles and the three primary contributing factors to tight muscles are inadequate activity, stress and an unbalanced posture. Relief comes from addressing these three underlying factors.
- Also understand that “protecting” the back contributes to back pain.
- To begin physical activity, start with a pleasurable activity that is not difficult to do (you can use a checklist of all curtailed activities, with pleasure and difficulty ratings as a guide).
- It is important, as with all clients, to start from where the client is and build gradually. It is also important to know that with time and effort, all desired activities can be resumed. Walking is an excellent start for many clients.
- Soreness may be experienced as muscles get used to being used again. Also, stress that accompanies moving again and postural/muscular imbalances may contribute to muscle tightness and pain. You can minimize discomfort due to muscular bracing by encouraging clients to breathe through pain and deliberately relax their back muscles if they experience discomfort.
- As clients begin to increase physical activity, their muscles and joints will begin to loosen up and become more functional. Self-efficacy will improve as things that they previously thought that they couldn’t do become activities to enjoy once again.
- Further, clients will learn that they are not actually “damaged”, as they may have thought, and that they do not benefit from “protecting” their backs.
- Part of the client’s cycle of pain may have been to eliminate doing things that relieved stress. When clients start moving again, particularly regaining the things that they enjoy doing, they not only begin to recover on a biomechanical/musculoskeletal level, but they eliminate the stress of not doing the things they love as they add stress-relieving activities back into their lives.
Many people may be used to “rationing” their activities, as in “I’ll play tennis today, but I’ll not be able to ….. tomorrow”. It is important for the client to understand that rationing is not necessary.

Sample Goals for Clients with Chronic Back Pain

1. Get active
   - Start with things that are enjoyable, pleasant and easy to do
   - Walking is a great place to start
   - Gradually increase
   - Add/try activities until you can do EVERYTHING that you want to do!

2. Deal with stress
   - Understand the relationship between stress and muscle tension
   - Practice a relaxation technique such as progressive muscle relaxation or meditation
   - Practice mindfulness
     - ALL fear and anxiety involve thinking about the future!
     - Notice how many of your thoughts are future-oriented
     - When your focus in on the future, notice, then bring back to the present
   - Address life stressors

3. Retrain your body to have a balanced posture
   - Relax abdominals
   - Elongate spine
   - Relax rib cage
   - Balance head
   - Roll shoulders back
   - Bend from hips, keeping spine elongated

4. Other factors
   - Ergonomics
   - Nutrition
   - Self-care

Closing thought...

The objective of wellness coaching for clients with chronic back pain, or BACKCoaching™, is to guide the client to understanding the Cycle of Pain and the Cycle of Recovery, and making a choice of which cycle they choose to be in. If they choose to transition to the cycle of recovery, the coach then guides the client to understanding and resumption of life activities.