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Promoting the Use of Self-management Strategies for People With Persistent Musculoskeletal Disorders: The Role of Physical Therapists

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Persistent musculoskeletal pain is a worldwide health problem resulting in negative effects on individuals' well-being and substantial costs to society. Recently, there has been discussion about effective treatment approaches to persistent musculoskeletal disorders, including low back pain.^{5,8,15,23,29}

In this Viewpoint, we argue that self-management strategies are essential to the management of persistent musculoskeletal disorders and outline the physical therapist's role in supporting effective self-management.

Persistent Musculoskeletal Disorders

The most common musculoskeletal disorders include osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, and spine-related neck and back problems.²⁶ Among occupationally active adults, musculoskeletal disorders are the main cause of disability.²⁶ Musculoskeletal disorders are often work re-

lated and a considerable problem in the workplace—they lead to human suffering, lost time due to sickness absence, and reduced work productivity (presenteeism).¹ Musculoskeletal disorders often have a multifactorial origin and are influenced by multifactorial risk factors, including biomechanical, psychosocial, and individual characteristics.¹⁶ Moreover, many of these musculoskeletal disorders are often resistant to current treatments.^{23,26}

A person-centered approach that focuses on self-management and a healthy

lifestyle is important to restore and maintain function, to improve participation in the long term, and to provide a management plan instead of a cure.^{15,23} We believe that self-management support, as an overall approach to persistent musculoskeletal disorders and their multifactorial biopsychosocial origin, may contribute to the long-term management of these conditions.¹⁹ In this way, patients will feel empowered and have the skills and knowledge to actively manage their condition, even after the initial treatment period has ended.

Self-management

Self-management fits the *positive health concept* ("the ability to adapt and to self-manage, in the face of social, physical, and emotional challenges")¹⁸ as an overarching

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approach to prevent long-term disability from persistent musculoskeletal disorders. Barlow et al⁴ defined self-management as “the ability to manage the symptoms, treatment, physical and psychosocial consequences, and lifestyle changes inherent in living with a chronic condition.”

Patients’ expectations need to change, so that people are less likely to expect a diagnosis or a cure for their pain.¹⁵ This kind of thinking reframes the expectation of a passive treatment approach that cures the condition²³ to that of an active approach (eg, self-management and exercise) as central to long-term management.

Effective self-management is based on skills to actively participate in, and take responsibility for, persistent conditions.²² Essential self-management skills include problem solving, decision making, resource utilization, action planning, self-tailoring, self-monitoring, and creating a patient-health professional partnership.^{4,12,22}

Efficacy of Self-management Programs

There is strong evidence to support the use of self-management in many persistent conditions¹⁴; however, for musculoskeletal disorders, the evidence is equivocal.¹¹⁻¹⁴ The variation in outcomes across study findings could be explained by the low levels of reported participation in self-management programs¹⁷ or by the mode of delivery, considering that layperson-led self-management programs may not be as effective as clinician-led programs.^{2,25}

Another reason for variable outcomes could be the way that self-management programs are provided. Traditionally, these programs use lengthy initial periods of contact conducted in a group format, followed by strategies to continue the self-management interventions without additional consultation.⁶ Potential flaws in this model are that the group approach fails to develop a meaningful therapeutic alliance in which the patient and provider work together to develop a patient-preferred approach, including feedback and adjustment of the self-management program.⁶

Self-management Within Physical Therapy Practice

Physical therapists can contribute to reducing or preventing the negative impact of musculoskeletal conditions.²⁷ Physical therapy as an intervention helps to maintain and improve musculoskeletal health and well-being,²⁷ and exercise and physical activity are effective in treating musculoskeletal pain and improving health.²⁷ Therefore, an active lifestyle and exercise should be the cornerstone of a self-management approach. People also need to understand their condition,²⁷ and a meaningful therapeutic alliance, in which the patient and physical therapist work together to develop a patient-preferred approach, is considered important.⁶

The most effective actions to support self-management include providing self-management support for individuals with specific conditions that is integrated into routine health care and interactive online self-management programs.¹⁴ Programs with individual sessions or in a clinical setting might improve adherence.³ With their expertise in musculoskeletal disorders and the duration of patient contact, physical therapists are ideally positioned to support people with persistent musculoskeletal disorders in their self-management.

What Physical Therapists Do Now

Physical therapists regularly spend time prescribing self-management strategies such as exercise, advice, and the use of heat or ice, suggesting that self-management may be an important complement to in-clinic care.²⁸

What “Good” Self-management Support Should Look Like

Self-management support should address biomechanical, psychosocial, and individual characteristics. To facilitate effective self-management, (1) help the patient to identify his or her barriers and goals, (2) assist in identifying optimal strategies to reduce or avoid symptom exacerbation through problem solving, and (3) support

the patient to identify ways to measure the effectiveness of self-management.

Within a self-management approach, physical therapists can apply principles of cognitive behavioral therapy, shared decision making, acceptance and commitment therapy, mindfulness, motivational interviewing, and pain education.

The connotation of prescribing self-management strategies is undesirable—it downplays the importance of the patient being an active participant in decision making, and emphasizes top-down delivery to a passive patient.¹⁴ Self-management strategies using passive approaches (medication, hot packs) increase the likelihood of pain behavior and disability, while active strategies, such as exercise, decrease the likelihood.⁷

Self-management Support Is Not Simply Patient Education

Patient education usually involves clinicians providing disease-specific information, teaching specific disease-related information, and contingency planning. Self-management support focuses on teaching skills that can be generalized and that patients can use to manage their own health conditions independently.²⁴

Adapting the Approach to the Needs of Different Folks

People are different with regard to self-management competency and health locus of control, despite similar symptoms. Some patients may need more support compared to others.³⁰ It is also important to help patients identify and address possible barriers to self-management⁹ with patient-selected strategies to avoid negative thoughts (eg, creating a list of positive statements posted on the refrigerator at home), stay motivated to achieve their goals (engage family and friends to keep the patient on track), and deal with anxiety and depression (discussion with general practitioner).

Providing Self-management Support in Practice

Physical therapists can provide self-management support that can lead to

enhanced self-management skills, self-management behavior, and long-term management of the musculoskeletal disorder (FIGURE). Consider using a behavior change framework, such as the attitude-social influence-efficacy model¹⁰ (with attitude, self-efficacy, social influence, knowledge, and skills as determinants of behavior), and include topics based on the patient's needs and goals. Specific self-management strategies, such as goal

setting, modeling, feedback, discussion, self-monitoring, guided practice, and skill training,²⁰ can foster behavior change and equip patients with the skills needed to actively manage their condition.²²

In this individualized self-management approach, physical therapists focus on developing a "management" plan to limit the impact of the condition on the person's well-being, in close collaboration and partnership with the patient. Prob-

lem solving, decision making, resource utilization, forming a patient-provider partnership, action planning, self-tailoring, and self-monitoring are essential components of this approach. Based on patients' characteristics, needs, and goals, physical therapists can focus on patients' attitudes, self-efficacy, social influence, knowledge, and skills with regard to the long-term management of the musculoskeletal disorder. Johnston et al²¹ provided practical tips for physical therapists to incorporate self-management in practice (TABLE).

Key Points

- Physical therapists should use a self-management approach to individualized (physical therapy) treatment for patients with persistent musculoskeletal disorders whenever possible.
- Physical therapists should use customized self-management support, targeting biomechanical, psychosocial, and individual characteristics in their treatment of people with persistent musculoskeletal disorders.

TABLE

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR PHYSICAL THERAPISTS TO INCORPORATE SELF-MANAGEMENT INTO PRACTICE*

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish rapport Adopt an active listening communication style Provide information Develop an action plan Goals of treatment are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Specific Measurable Action based Realistic Time framed | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use a nonjudgmental approach Facilitate problem solving Promote self-efficacy Link patients with resources Encourage patient to maintain personal health records Active follow-up |
|--|--|

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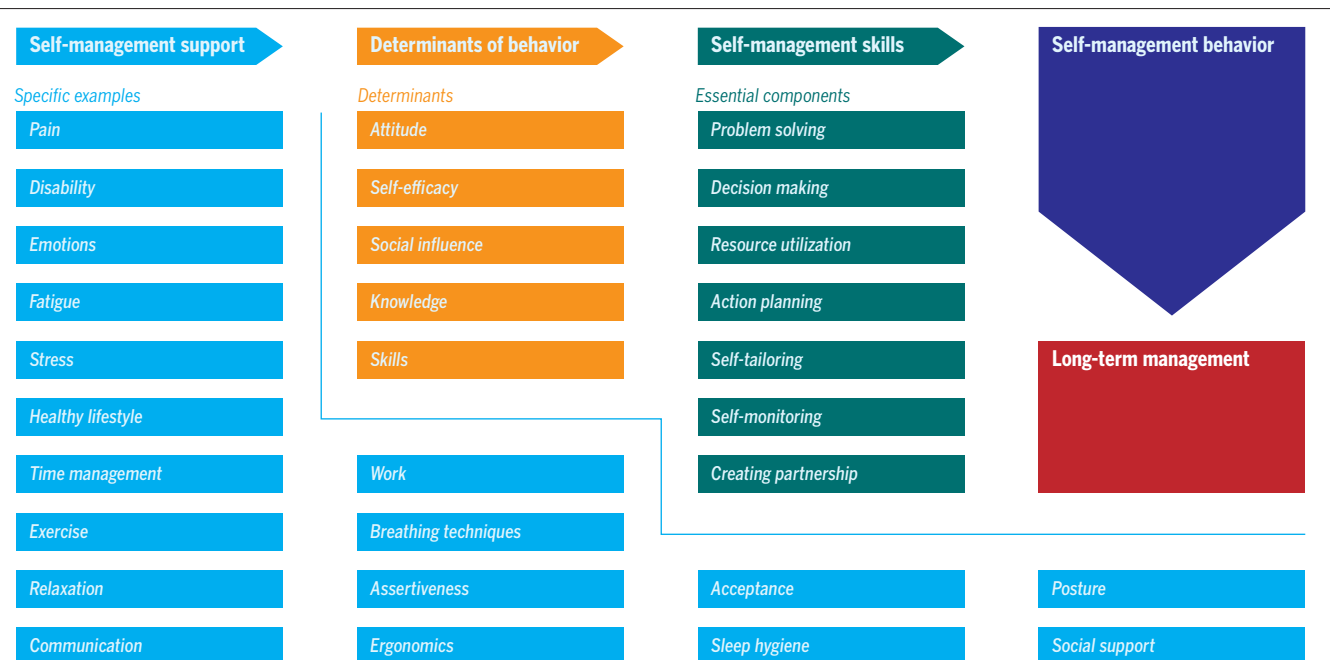


FIGURE. The illustration shows how physical therapist-provided self-management support, with regard to topics based on the patient's characteristics (blue boxes), can influence determinants of behavior (orange boxes) and can lead to enhanced self-management skills (green boxes), practice of self-management behavior (dark blue box), and long-term management (red box) of the musculoskeletal disorder.

- Self-management support should focus on behavior change and an active lifestyle and should target attitude, self-efficacy, social influence, knowledge, and skills with regard to managing the condition.
- Problem solving, decision making, resource utilization, the formation of a patient-provider partnership, action planning, self-tailoring, self-monitoring, and patient-health professional partnership are essential components in this approach. ●

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