



## FIBROMYALGIA: WHY DO I HURT ALL OVER?

BY TZIPORA WOLFF, MD

As doctors, we are trained to think about patho-physiology of disease. This means understanding the process which is going wrong in the body, causing illness. In medical school, we learned of many different mechanisms of disease: Infection, trauma, inflammation, autoimmunity, neoplasia, congenital anomalies and endocrine disorders to name a few. We can use the framework of our understanding of patho-physiology to diagnose and treat most diseases.

There is one large category of illnesses for which this is not the case. These illnesses plague modern society. Despite all the advances in modern medicine, our patients continue to suffer

they inflamed? Were they infiltrated by a toxin? Were they malformed from birth? None of these mechanisms have been found to be at play here. In fact, most articles on fibromyalgia admit that modern medicine cannot explain the illness.

Think about that for a moment. We have state-of-the-art diagnostic ability in 2017. Our radiologic studies have never been more advanced. Our medical knowledge continues to explode at a mind boggling speed. Even so, this common, vexing disease cannot be explained! How can this be?

Patients are often frustrated that physicians don't understand the ills of the mind, while psychologists are not trained to understand the ailments of the body. Fortunately, these two scientific disciplines overlap in the understanding of fibromyalgia and related mind- body illnesses.



from these ailments. The common thread in all of these disorders is the following: the root cause, or mechanism of these variable illnesses does not stem from a disease process in the body. There is no infection, no trauma, no autoimmune dysfunction which can explain why the symptoms developed. In fact, in each and every one of these illnesses, the tissues of the body are fundamentally healthy. Why, then, do these patients suffer?

Let us take an example, to understand the concept of a mind-body illness. It is estimated that 5% of the adult population suffer from fibromyalgia. The disease is twice as common in women than in men. The disease was first described in 1990. Its name refers to "Fibro"- fibroid connective tissue, "myo" - muscles "algia"- pain. Pain in muscles and connective tissue. These patients suffer from aches throughout the body. They are extraordinarily sensitive to touch. Even a light touch can cause uncomfortable pain rather than the mild pressure sensation one would expect. The pain can be disabling and may interfere with daily activities.

There is no known cure for fibromyalgia. Medications can help mitigate the pain, but do not reverse the condition. Exercise, massage and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy have all been documented as helpful, yet none have resulted in a cure.

To better understand this illness, we must think about the patho-physiology. Why are the muscles so tender or painful? Are

Doctors and therapists alike can appreciate the underlying process here. The mechanism is called "central nerve processing disorder". It is a common feature of mind-body disorders. The central nervous system refers to the "command center" in the brain which processes input from the nerves throughout the body. In general, this processing system is meant to warn us of danger (i.e. when we touch a hot stove). In fibromyalgia patients, a light touch can feel like pain, even though there is no danger present. This is due to a misinterpretation by the brain. Think of it as a "short circuit". The light touch signal becomes interpreted as painful. No one knows why this occurs, but it is clear that the mind is the primary culprit. Repressed emotions, painful memories and negative thinking patterns all contribute to central processing disorders.

When a patient can be trained to use her fibromyalgia symptoms as a "red flag" to think about what is going on in her emotional world, she can avoid feeling upset, angry and frustrated at her body for causing her to suffer. Instead she can use the symptoms as a cue to explore what is happening deep in her mind, which may be causing her central nervous system to "go haywire". Only when she acknowledges the root of the pain is true healing possible, even likely.

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