

The Role of the Psychologist in the Management of Pain

Chronic pain is prevalent, expensive and results in major losses to productivity and quality of life for many Australians. Psychologists are qualified health professionals skilled in helping people with a range of concerns related to wellbeing, mental health, and behaviour, including the management and prevention of pain.

The evolution of the psychologist's role has occurred in parallel with our increased understanding of the biological, psychological, and social factors which contribute to pain. Psychologists also bring an interdisciplinary perspective in non-clinical pain management roles, leading to improvements in healthcare education, research, and program development.

Why are psychologists involved?

Psychologists are well placed to provide non-pharmacological interventions for the management of chronic pain, for which there is strong evidence. Learning about pain and developing new skills at an early stage in the experience of pain can reduce the risk that pain will become chronic, and increases the chances of a person re-engaging with work and previously enjoyed activities.

Pain and mental health have a reciprocal relationship; almost half of people with chronic pain experience some form of psychological difficulty which can exacerbate pain, and undermine their ability to manage. Treating both mental illness and pain concurrently will lead to better outcomes than treating these in isolation.

Psychologists are curious about human experiences and help people better understand their own patterns of thoughts, sensation, and emotion, thereby empowering them to change.

Who should be providing “pain psychology”?

Psychologists have comprehensive training in human behaviour. Those working in pain management will have additional understanding of the complexities of pain through appropriate training and supervision.

Emerging psychologists working in pain management are committed to maintaining currency with pain science and psychological approaches to pain management via mentoring and/or additional formal training and education.

Experienced psychologists working in pain management who understand and practice within a collaborative and interprofessional paradigm, and have knowledge of the multidimensional nature of pain and the importance of comprehensive clinical care..

What do they do?

Psychologists assess, treat, and evaluate from a biopsychosocial perspective using evidence-based approaches.

Support people to develop pain self-management skills, learn how to change unhelpful thoughts and beliefs about pain, and change health related behaviours to overcome barriers to recovery.

Address psychological factors which contribute to pain, including distress, disengagement from enjoyable activities, maladaptive coping strategies, and difficulties with sleep.

Enhance patient and treatment team's understanding of shared goals through ongoing monitoring of progress and outcomes using standardised measures.

When should psychologists be involved?

Psychologists have traditionally been seen in the management of long-standing chronic pain. However, their value is now better recognised across the trajectory of pain, being increasingly included in acute pain, presurgical assessment, prevention, and longer-term treatment planning.

If psychological risk factors are identified in the early stages of pain onset, referral to a Psychologist is recommended as soon as possible.

Improved outcomes from early intervention will prevent long term pain-related disability.

How should they provide service for pain management?

Interdisciplinary practice is ideal, with multiple disciplines collaborating to develop a shared understanding, cohesive treatment approach, and joint facilitation of education and intervention.

Where co-location with multidisciplinary teams is possible, this is preferred. However, having open communication to enable a shared team approach will support best practice even when psychologists are working independently in a single-discipline setting.

Psychologists will be providing services for pain management in a range of modalities including online, in-person, individual and group programs. It is expected there will be significant variability to suit the needs of different client groups.