

Incorporating pain experiences into personal identity: Implications for romantic relationships and securing social support

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Introduction

- Chronic pain (CP) affects one in five adults and often has a direct, adverse effect on mental and physical well-being (McWilliams et al., 2003; Breivik et al., 2006).
- Patients benefit mentally (e.g., improved coping, reducing anxiety/depression), physically (e.g., reduced functional impairment), and instrumentally (e.g., financial support) from a loving, committed romantic partner (Holtzman et al., 2007; Porter, Keefe, Willington, & de Williams, 2008).
- Coping with a partner's CP, however, often places significant strain on a well-partner; this likely contributes to the elevated rates of relationship dissolution noted among persons with CP (Lewandowski, Morris, Draucker, & Risko, 2007; Porter et al., 2008; Soderberg et al; Torrance, Smith, Bennett, & Lee, 2006; Wolfe & Michaud, 2004).
- No research has explored barriers persons with CP experience while initiating/developing new romantic relationships, nor how these factors may influence participants' goals and expectations in the romantic relationship context.
 - This restricts our understanding of the challenges persons with pain must navigate in order to form supportive, committed romantic relationships.

Purpose & Method

- This study was undertaken with the broad purpose of improving our understanding of how CP impacts the initiation and development of romantic relationships (i.e., dating).**
- 40 partner-seeking or newly partnered (less than six months, non-cohabitating) men and women ($M_{age} = 32.2$ [SD = 8.3] yrs) completed a brief questionnaire assessing demographic, pain, and dating variables followed by a semi-structured phone or in-person interview. The interview focused on how CP has affected their dating experiences, expectations, goals, and the progression of their new romantic relationships.
- Using the six phases of Thematic Analysis,⁹ themes were extracted from verbatim transcripts and hierarchically categorized to develop a framework for understanding the impact of CP on relationship initiation and development, participants expectations for current/future relationships, and relationship goals.

Select participant demographics

	N(%)		N(%)
<i>Ethnicity:</i> Caucasian vs other	30(75) vs 10 (25)	<i>Primary chronic pain type</i> N(%)	
<i>Employment:</i>		Back pain	21 (52.5)
Working full-time vs part-time	12(30.0) vs 7(17.5)	Localized pain	8 (20.0)
Unemployed/Disability/Student	21(52.5)	Arthritis	5 (12.5)
<i>Relationship status:</i> Single vs newly partnered	22(55) vs 18(45)	Fibromyalgia	1 (2.5)
<i>Concurrent mental health issues</i> (e.g., depression, anxiety)	27(67.5)	Complex regional pain syndrome	1 (2.5)
		Sciatica	2 (5.0)
		Other	3(7.5)

Results

- Explicit relationship barriers (e.g., physical limitations, mental health difficulties, CP stereotypes and stigmatization) were detected early in our study
- Latent analysis revealed CP's impact on identity plays a major role in shaping participants' experiences of explicit barriers and expectations about dating in the context of CP.
- Negotiating CP- identity, a primary latent theme, was an overarching barrier that affected our participants' dating experiences and outlook.**
 - described as a process with three components (realizing I can't be me, evaluating 'me with CP', and 'with CP' identities) which, when further explicated, reveal three distinct identity trajectories that influenced participants' romantic relationship experiences and expectations.

Negotiating CP- identity



Conclusions

- Negotiating a new identity as a person with pain is a multifaceted process that involves grieving the loss of the former, pre-CP self and formulation of a new, with-CP identity
 - Negative evaluations of participants' with-CP identity, often based on internalized disability or pain related stigma, engender feelings of shame and inadequacy (i.e., I'm not good enough)
 - When people judge their with-CP identity as shameful, they are less willing and able to work towards initiating/developing a loving romantic relationship - a cherished life goal for many.
- Theoretical and clinical implications**
- Given the salience of participants' experience negotiating a with-CP identity, it is possible this process also affects participants' willingness and ability to pursue other meaningful values and goals.
 - Specifically, formulation of a shameful CP-identity may impede activity engagement; a major component of CP-acceptance that is a significant predictor of positive outcomes for persons with pain (e.g., lower perceived pain severity, pain-related anxiety, depression, and improved physical and psychosocial functioning).⁷⁻⁸
 - These findings suggest positive with-CP identity development may be an important clinical target for helping-professionals working with persons with CP, and emphasize the value of integrating values-based activities into evidence-based interventions.