



Acceptance underlies romantic-partner seeking success among persons with chronic pain

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Background

- Chronic pain (CP) affects one in five adults and is directly related to many serious secondary consequences including depression, anxiety, family stress, and employment limitations/loss.¹⁻⁴
- Participation in a high quality committed romantic relationship can improve perceived social support, alleviate stress, and positively impact mental and physical health.⁵
- Coping with CP, however, often strains relationships. Consequently, those with CP are more likely to be partner-seeking.⁶
- Thus far, couples who are committed and cohabitating have been the primary focus of research exploring how CP impacts romantic relationships. No research has examined the impact of CP on partner-seeking and early relationship development.
- CP acceptance, conceptualized as abandoning efforts to reduce or avoid the experience of pain (*pain willingness*) and participating in valued life activities despite pain (*activity engagement*) is a significant predictor of positive outcomes (e.g., lower perceived pain severity, pain-related anxiety, depression, and improved physical and psychosocial functioning).⁷⁻⁸
- Whether CP acceptance also influences partner-seeking and relationship-building capacity is unknown.

Purpose & Method

- This study examined the perceptions of people with CP regarding how their CP impacted their partner-seeking and early relationship development activities.
- 40 partner-seeking or newly partnered (less than six months, non-cohabitating) individuals ($M_{age} = 32.2$ [$SD = 8.3$] 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 outlook 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 approach, initiation, and development strategies.



Results

More accepting participants allocated more resources to finding/developing romantic relationships despite pain (activity engagement), utilized better strategies for communicating about pain, made less effort to avoid pain (pain willingness), and generally had more success in finding suitable romantic partners.

Oftentimes my hips turn into a huge joke and I love that we can just laugh about it because there's nothing that I can really do. I'm doing all that I can about it and it's a part of my lifestyle. It's a lot easier to deal with it, laugh about the situation than feel really bad about it all the time. I've been in other relationships where like the communication hasn't been as open and they just assumed that part of it is when I don't speak up and say like "I can't do that, that hurts" because I'm embarrassed. So it's really great to talk about it. —Abbey, 27 yrs, in a relationship

I have a great woman who matches my libido but when I'm unable to perform physical things, she's understanding and she doesn't get frustrated and...that's a huge positive right there, just talking about the pain and the relationship. The other positive is that she understands that I go through this and I'm not making excuses, that it is the real thing. —Kareem, 50 yrs, in a relationship

I want to move forward so I just put it to the side type deal, put my pain to the back burner type deal and just keep on moving on. —Tim, 38 yrs, in a relationship

Going out and doing new experiences... the whole dating scene has helped because its allowed like going out and doing new things and that's kind of increased or helped make myself feel better and my mood better and those kind of things. —Richard, 24 yrs, in a relationship

I think that someone with chronic pain has to accept the fact that this is a part of their life and nobody's body is perfect. So I do believe very strongly that there is that person out there who can give you that support, emotionally from you know the opposite sex stand point. I totally believe that there is a hope out there. —Mick, 31 yrs, single

My pain is getting a bit better, like I'm learning to deal with it a bit better - after a year. If I can manage my pain and learn to do some physical activities that are a little more outdoorsy, then that might give me something more to do to feel more positive about and an activity to share with a partner. I expect [the pain] is going to be with me through life... it's just going to be a part of who I am. And I'm just going to have to deal with it. —Kahlil, 44 yrs, single

If I had a relationship that probably would be helpful, but I don't feel like it's a good time to start one. I just feel like a lot of my health issues are not well managed. I can't work which I really love to work, I get a lot of satisfaction, value out of that... I just feel like, I've got to fix my shit. I feel like I would like to have my life more organized. I don't know if I thought about this before, but I wouldn't want to date somebody that's in the position that I'm in. —Melissa, 39 yrs, single

I want the relationship but it's never usually more than a half a dozen [dates]. I just have this big secret and instead of revealing it, I just kind of shy away and disappear and don't respond anymore. Honestly, it gets depressing because like if I can't be myself, they're not going to accept me, then who's going to accept me? —Melanie, 32 yrs, single

I'm not at a point where I have enough peace of mind maybe to engage with someone else yet...I'm still trying to find that. I'm trying to reach a point where I can cope with this effectively and it doesn't consume me...I do see a future of getting back to a romantic relationship, to a serious one and making serious efforts and succeeding then, and being happy. I think I need to find really an effective way to cope with the pain before I can make a serious effort at that. —Owen, 36 yrs, single

Less accepting participants were mostly single, were reluctant to engage in partner-seeking activities due to ongoing coping difficulties (e.g., pain avoidance), imposed more limitations and preconditions on their dating activities (e.g., lack of pain willingness), and often targeted partners whose interests matched their pre-CP abilities.

Discussion & Conclusions

- Participants who were less accepting of their CP:
 - Were reluctant to integrate CP into their identity, were less willing to engage in typical dating activities, had negative expectations about their dating prospects, and used less adaptive ways of coping (e.g., hiding their CP, avoiding dating activities that *could* increase symptoms, seeking very physically active partners).
 - Set preconditions to dating (e.g., better control of their symptoms, improved self-perceptions) that caused them to defer attempts to find a partner.
 - Described having low self-esteem and greater difficulties managing thoughts and feelings consistent with depression/anxiety.
 - Were reluctant to disclose information about their pain, which led to difficulty building intimacy and communicating with a new partner. Nondisclosure was associated with sabotaging potential relationships or testing new partners in an effort to confirm negative expectations.
 - Generally recognized that these thoughts and behaviours hindered their chances of establishing a romantic relationship, but were unable or unwilling to change them.
- These results suggest low levels of pain acceptance impede efforts to seek and maintain a new romantic relationship. Engagement in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)⁹ may help reduce this barrier by increasing acceptance. Given the value of supportive romantic partners to persons with CP, access to psychotherapy (ACT) should be considered a clinical priority for patients whose goals include relationship development.
- Although this study focused exclusively on new romantic relationships, it is possible acceptance may also underlie success in forging and developing other types of interpersonal relationships (e.g., close friendships, interfamilial relationships) and in maintaining existing romantic relationships. Future research should investigate the impact of pain acceptance on other interpersonal relationships that can provide support to persons with CP.

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Increasing CP Acceptance