

What's the best approach for my chronic pain? Biobehavioral or biopharmacological?

For the last 30 years, the **Bio-Pharmacological approach** has been the mainstay for treating chronic pain in the United States. As the name implies, this approach focuses on using medications that block pain signals and decrease inflammation. While this works well for acute pain, it is ineffective for chronic pain because it does nothing to address the deep suffering that makes chronic pain so unbearable.

People who suffer from chronic pain, typically present more than 3 months, have much more than simple pain signals involved in their pain experience. Pain may have hijacked their lives. They may be depressed and anxious about their futures, feeling hopeless and lost. They may have insomnia, loss of self-esteem and self-confidence, and difficulties in relationships. These factors play a major role in their pain and suffering. Although it is tempting to say “if you’ll just take the pain away, I’ll be fine” this is far from true. Effective treatment of chronic, persistent pain requires an entirely different approach, that includes multiple disciplines and a key shift in thinking, from the idea of “reducing the pain signal” to improving function and wellbeing.

The **Bio-Behavioral approach** (also known as Bio-Psychosocial) to chronic pain does just this, by encompassing the whole person. Instead of relying on medications only, this team-based approach includes chronic-pain-informed physical therapists and chronic-pain-informed behavioral therapists working in collaboration with your primary care practitioner. The goal is to actually “rewire” the patient’s brain. The negative thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that have accumulated from years of suffering need to be replaced by more positive and productive thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that can help the patient move forward. Stated in another way, a key component of the Bio Behavioral model is the explicit movement away from focusing on pain levels and towards focusing on the impact that the pain has on daily activities, goals, and function.