

RETAIN Annual Convening Strategy Roundtable: Shifting Focus from Pain to Function

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The Visual Analog Pain Scale Isn't Serving Us Well



We know from neuroscience research that dwelling on pain and repeatedly asking patients about it reinforce pain pathways.



We know from experience and expert recommendations that focusing on function is more effective in helping patients renormalize their lives after a work injury.



We know that focusing on and discussing function is particularly important in cases where subjective complaints exceed objective findings.

Recent Research in the Neurosciences Gives New Insights into Pain



- Pain is an unpleasant sensory *and* emotional experience that may or may not be correlated with tissue damage/injury
- Pain can persist even after tissues have healed
- Emotional pain and physical pain share the same neural networks
- Repeatedly asking about pain reinforces pain pathways — “grow” pain by thinking about it

The Reign of Pain Lies Mainly in the Brain

- Body parts have sensors that trigger messages to the brain about the current state of the body
- Our brains make pain when they conclude we are in danger, and we need to do something about it
- Our brains sometimes get it wrong



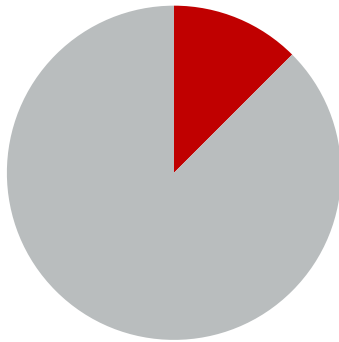
Our Pain System Can Become Overly Protective

- When pain is ongoing, our pain system “learns” pain and becomes more efficient at producing it
- Nerve cells in the spinal cord and brain become more responsive
- Entire system is “on alert”
- Pain in a body part or region can be turned up or down by thoughts, feelings, stress, anxiety, and things going on in your life that are perceived as a threat

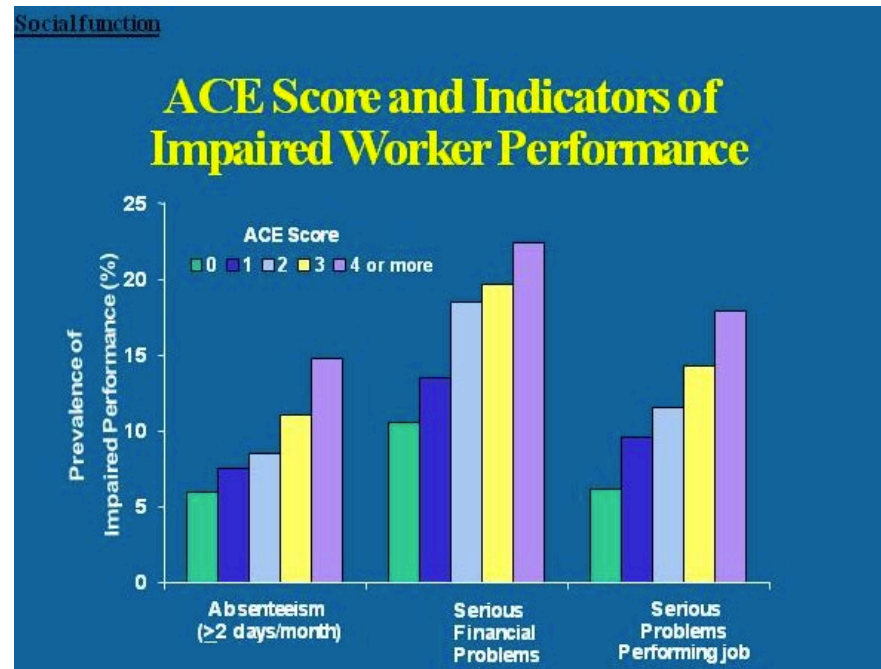


Quality Medical Outcomes

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) result in the pain system being on alert — neural pathways altered by childhood experiences.



- **12.5% of the adult population** in the U.S. has ACE scores higher than 4
- Predictor for delayed recovery



Quality Medical Outcomes

Usual medical approach of asking about pain was **STALE** (standard medical approach lacked efficacy).

- Repeatedly asking about pain resulted in more entrenched pain pathways
- Repeatedly asking about pain led patients to believe it was the most important factor to well-being and a gauge of healing progression



Quality Medical Outcomes

Shift from pain to function changes:

Focus from:



subjective to **objective**

Focus of the patient/physician conversation moves from:



disability to **ability**

Benefits of the Focus on Function



Reduced opioid utilization.

Repeatedly asking patients to think about pain activates neural pain pathways and increases pain.



Increased productivity.

Focusing on what and how much a patient *can do* and on progress the patient is making helps create an “ability mindset” that can increase productivity and reduce anxiety about life getting back to normal.



Improved outcomes.

Setting tangible recovery goals can encourage faster recovery and reduce case duration.