

Back Disorders: Combination Physical and Mental-Physical

Low back pain is very common and usually thought to have a solely physical basis.

In 1973 I had a severe disorder across the lumbar area but from an emotional basis. My wife and I were having a variant of mid-life crisis. (1972) We were managing our lives as usual but were quite estranged emotionally. I developed bilateral lumbar back pain after putting together a mail-order greenhouse for my daughter. I had had this in the past from doing heavy work. Usually it remitted in a couple of days.

This time it persisted and increased over the months. In the fall I was taking pain pills and could hardly drive my car. The last straw was when I developed a foot-drop of my right foot. I finally sought help from my orthopedic friend. He had me get a consult from a neurosurgeon. They agreed that surgery was not indicated. I had several days of bed rest and then commenced a program of physical therapy twice a week.

The underlying problem was that I had been seeking comfort in a relationship with a former college girlfriend who was in the same state as I in her marriage. As a psychiatrist I was aware that I was “acting out” my emotional problem while not being conscious of feeling guilt. Once I became aware that I was harming myself I had to change course. I had to deal with the physical problem and then address the underlying emotional problem. An additional stressor was from my several week procrastination of the necessity of putting together a program for the psychiatric section of the California Medical Association to be presented the following year. I finally put it together during my week of bed-rest.

The basis for the foot-drop had a separate origin. Several years previously I rode my wife’s bike down to my office one weekend. I decided the seat was too low for the ride home. The bike was leaning against a wall. I was on the right side. I put my left foot on the right pedal, leaned over to my left and struggled to lift the seat. It didn’t budge. But at the same time I experienced a shooting pain in my right lumbar region. I thought “This is odd” so I pulled again and got the same result! The pain did not persist. When years later I developed a right foot-drop I realized that I had damaged in intervertebral disc years before and now it was bulging against a nerve root. This combination of factors is what I have termed Mental-Physical injury.

The physical therapy lasted about three months. There were two one hour sessions a week consisting of heat packs, massage, electrical stimulation, and later traction. After a session I would feel very relaxed, both physically and emotionally. The outcome was very successful. The foot-drop disappeared and never returned. There remained a slight loss of sensitivity and strength in my right leg and thigh. I was given a routine of Williams’ Exercises to do each morning and did them faithfully for the next five years. Since the primary problem was emotional, I found a psychiatrist and was on the couch 2-3 hours a week for the next ten years. I hope to write about my “self-analysis” in the near future.

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