BOOK REVIEW


The editors of this self-help guide rightly point out that a book on self-management strategies for chronic pain tailored to the needs of older persons makes an important contribution. While there are numerous self-help books on pain management already on the market, this manual fills a niche with its specific focus on orienting the information provided to the unique life circumstances of older adults. Moreover, health care professionals and other caregivers are likely to find this publication quite useful as a means of structuring treatment and care of older adults who present with persistent pain problems.

The guide describes a self-help program in a series of chapters written by leading pain researchers and experienced health care professionals, including the editors. Older adults who live independently and have ongoing pain problems are the intended audience for the book. Appropriately, the book is published in a large font size, and contains illustrations and photographs.

Each chapter includes information, activities and learning aids. Many chapters begin with a case example that illustrates issues to be discussed in the chapter. The self-management focus builds gradually. Chapters 1 and 2 are intended to increase awareness of the factors that influence pain and taking stock of one's own situation. Behavioural and psychological strategies to enhance pain control are taught in chapter 3 (distraction, relaxation, diaphragmatic breathing, word enhancement, imagery, balancing rest and activity, examining and challenging thoughts). Chapter 4 moves on to the discussion of pain and emotion, while chapter 5 addresses social support and loneliness. Exercise receives extensive treatment in chapter 6. Chapter 7 focuses on maximizing function and energy through modifications to both the home environment and daily life. Chapter 8 addresses sleep hygiene and nutrition. In chapters 7 and 8 in particular, the distinct circumstances of older adults are highlighted with respect to the issues under discussion.

Chapter 9 addresses the doctor-patient relationship, and chapter 10 is a basic reference guide of medications and common pain conditions among older adults. These chapters contain essential information that will be of variable familiarity to older chronic pain sufferers depending on personal history and experience with the health care system.

Chapter 11 deviates from the self-management focus of the guide to provide information for caregivers of older adults who have dementia. Although the manual primarily targets older adults, the editors strongly recommend that the manual be used in consultation with appropriate health professionals. Health care professionals are likely to find this publication quite useful as a means of structuring treatment of older adults who present with persistent pain problems. Furthermore, there are a couple of ways in which health professionals will easily be able to augment the value of the manual as a self-help resource for older adults.

First, as noted previously, chapter 11 provides information for caregivers of older adults who have dementia. This is an important topic, but given the advertised purpose of the guide (self-management), there is a risk that the audience for whom this chapter is intended may be missed, unless they are directed to the guide by their health care providers.

Second, the editors’ recommendations for how older adults should use the book to achieve the full benefit from the program are included within the introductory chapter. It is suggested that readers spend approximately one week on each chapter, completing the book over a 10-week period. Instructions are an important feature of any self-help tool. In fact, they deserve more prominence because they set the framework for how this self-help guide should be used. Health care providers who use this resource to support their patients’ self-help efforts will be able to customize the instructions to the distinct needs of individuals. For example, from a motivational perspective, some people may benefit from starting with the chapters that involve environment, sleep and hygiene before tackling those that require more systematic practice (exercise and social support), to create the opportunity for some rewarding ‘quick fixes’. Success in making the changes recommended in these later chapters may increase the likelihood of follow-through on interventions that require more effort, such as reducing social isolation and implementing an exercise program.

In summary, this guide represents a useful addition to the self-management literature for pain sufferers. Health care professionals will find the guide very useful as a support for treatment of older patients with persistent pain problems, especially if they familiarize themselves with the checklists and other tools, and make use of these resources to assist their patients in building self-help capacity for pain management. Older adults who heed the advice to use the manual in consultation with appropriate health professionals will obtain the maximum value, but even those who elect to use the manual independently will enhance their knowledge about important lifestyle, behavioural and intervention-related issues that influence the course and intensity of their persistent pain problems.

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