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Change the focus: evaluation of two pain diaries with differences in affective load

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Chronic pain is a common disease affecting about 19 % of Europeans and 30 % of adults in the United States of America. Its cause, severeness and course goes beyond the organic origin and includes emotional, psychological and social factors. Attention control as a neuropsychological aspect demonstrated to be one of the influencing factors. In order to take advantage of these findings and to establish a benefit for the patient's perception, a method is required to direct the patient's attention. Pain diaries are an often-used instrument for recording pain. Recent studies have shown that the use of pain diaries itself can also have an impact on pain processing, recovery rate, subjective security, participation in care, pain treatment and the further course of the disease.

This study examined the effects of attention allocation on the pain experience and its cofactors using two pain diaries with differences in affective load. 26 chronic pain patients from different regions of Germany completed a pain diary and an activity diary in a cross-over design for 4 weeks each. At baseline, after 4 weeks and after 8 weeks, they filled out a 22-page long questionnaire on pain perception, social and neuropsychological factors.

Various factors of pain (intensity, quality, pain-related impairment of life), surrounding factors (quality of life, social support) and psychological comorbid currents (depression, anxiety) were investigated. The study population was 76,9 % female with a mean age of 41,8 (mean value) \pm 15,9 (standard deviation) years. Age, gender, location of pain and medication were included in the calculations as covariate factors. The patient's pain intensity was statistically significant increased after using the pain diary, and decreased after using the activity diary. The impairment of lifestyle (activities of daily living, social and work life) increased during the period of the pain diary, and decreased during the activity diary period. General well-being was reported to be lower after using the pain diary, and higher after using the activity diary. A trend effect with the significance level of $p = 0,075$ was shown in the influence of the diaries on the mean depression scales, which rose under the effect of the pain diary, and fell under the effect of the activity diary. No impact was found to be made on the variables of pain quality, physical functioning, social support, anxiety and stress.

Despite a small sample of $n = 26$ and a limited duration of 4 weeks for each diary, an effect could be found for the variables pain intensity, quality of life and impairment of daily, social and working life. This indicates that attention allocation has an important part in the course of the patient's pain experience and that it can be influenced positively but also negatively with the help of diaries. It might be helpful to integrate this information into the treatment and documentation of the disease.