



Retrain
the *brain*

manage
the *pain*

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What I learned in those six
weeks changed my life.”

— Injured worker Michael
Dempster, after participating
in the complex return-to-work
program at Millard Health.

Positive psychology helps clients overcome return-to-work barriers

By: Jamie Hall

Michael Dempster knows what it's like to live with pain.

It showed up at his door one day and moved right in, pinning him to his bed for weeks on end. It took away his mobility, his identity and, eventually, his hope.

"I was in a very dark place," recalls Dempster, now 26. "I was so depressed. I wasn't working. I was bedridden, so I couldn't work out. I was going through a divorce and my kids were in New Brunswick."

Two herniated discs

Dempster was working as a crane operator in Fort McKay when he injured his back.

"I was bent over, trying to put a wooden pad under an outrigger and I actually heard something 'pop' in my back," he recalls. "I didn't feel much pain at first, but within minutes it started radiating all down my right leg."

Tests revealed he had two herniated discs. The injury was made worse by the fact he had congenital spinal stenosis, a birth defect which made his spinal canal narrower than it should be. Surgery brought some relief, at least initially. But within a month, the pain increased exponentially as scar tissue started to develop and put pressure on Dempster's already-constricted spinal cord and the nerves surrounding it.

More surgery contemplated

"My back was just getting worse and worse," he says. "The pain was excruciating."

There was talk about a spinal fusion down the road. In the meantime, his WCB case manager referred Dempster to the complex return-to-work program at Edmonton's Millard Health, where people dealing with a long recovery, significant pain or psychological concerns are offered help.

"All I kept thinking was, 'I've tried everything—more surgery's the only way,'" says Dempster. "My back is physically messed up. This is a physical problem, not a psychological program. I thought the program was going to be a bunch of BS."

And now?

Unexpected results

"What I learned in those six weeks changed my life," he says, simply. "Really, it gave me back my life."

Kyle Schalk says Dempster's success is what he and the rest of his team at Millard hope for all of their clients, some of whom have dealt with persistent pain issues for weeks, months or even years.

"Pain can be a very debilitating thing," says Schalk, a psychologist. "The people we see have plateaued medically and continue to have pain issues."

Those issues, he says, can impact people's overall quality of life, their relationships with family and friends and their ability to get back to work.

A positive attitude makes the difference

Schalk works with clients individually and in group sessions. Clients also work with an occupational therapist, a physical therapist and an exercise therapist.

Over time, it became clear to Schalk and his team that clients who have a more positive attitude about themselves and about the future tend to do better, be more active and remain hopeful. With that in mind, they started incorporating more elements of positive psychology into the program, relying on research that shows things like mindfulness, gratitude, humour and happiness can benefit people who have to live with pain.

The team also teaches a lot of self-management strategies, showing clients how to sit with pain, breathe through it, or control it through meditation or visualization—all methods that can help change the way the brain and body respond to pain. >>



“Not every self-management technique works when it comes to positive psychology and pain, but, “you have to give it a chance.” — says Michael Dempster (pictured here with psychologist Kyle Schalk).

The right kind of focus

“Ours is not a surgical program; it’s a self-management program,” he explains. “We try to create a culture of hope and positivity and that can be a bit of a delicate balance because sometimes, their hope is to be pain-free. Our focus is to help them find productive ways to live their lives, despite the pain.”

In the end, Dempster found power in knowledge. His interest was piqued when Schalk screened a video during a group session about the brain’s ability to retrain itself, no matter what the issue. But it was what he read on the pages of a book that took things to another level and gave him the hope he was looking for.

Creating a pain management plan

“Kyle gave me a book called *Explain Pain*,” says Dempster, “and it basically gives you a blueprint to beat pain, mentally. It scientifically shows you how you can beat pain and gives you a plan. You can customize that plan to whatever you need to do. It’s very simple and very doable.”

Schalk saw Dempster change from that moment on.

“You could just see the spark. There was a point he just looked at me and said: ‘I’m going to retrain my brain. Watch this.’ And he did.”

It didn’t happen overnight. Slowly but surely, though, Dempster increased his pain tolerance threshold. He walked for five minutes every day until it didn’t hurt anymore, then increased the time by 30-second increments. He started doing laps at the swimming pool in his apartment building, beginning with five and eventually working his way up to almost 100.

Careful consistency is key

“You have to keep pushing that threshold up,” says Dempster, “but without actually physically hurting your body, which can be tricky. You have to be consistent, but smart.”

Today, he has a very strict work-out routine and he sticks to it.

“I’m very disciplined,” he says. “I don’t want to regress again. The stronger and healthier I am, the more sustainable it is for my back and the healthier it is for me, mentally. I never realized how closely connected mental health and physical health are until I didn’t have my physical health anymore.”

A new home, career path and life

Dempster has since moved back to New Brunswick to be closer to his children and his family. He has found a new career, too, working with a non-profit organization to help end homelessness.

“Really, the accident was that best thing that ever happened to me,” says Dempster. “I’m just so grateful for everything. Positive psychology really does make a difference, but you have to give it a chance.”

It’s not as though he has no pain, but what he has, he can manage.

Because Michael Dempster knows what it’s like to live with pain—and it’s no longer welcome in his home. **WS**