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Module 10
Chronic Low Back Pain/Sciatica –
Background Paper

Low back pain is epidemic in this country. From a physical point of view, low back pain has many causes, one of which is overstretched ligaments from poor posture or body mechanics, leading to disk herniation or rupture; other “causes” associated with low back pain include such conditions as fibrositis, fibromyalgia, degenerative disc disease, arthritis of the low back, rheumatism, or lumbago. When pain radiates down the leg, the condition is referred to as sciatica.

Traditional treatments for low back pain include surgery, pain medication, cortizone injections to block pain, TENS, chiropractic adjustments, or various physical therapy modalities, such as ice, heat, ultrasound, or manual techniques. Despite the millions of dollars spent by consumers to “cure” their low back pain through western medical techniques, most people continue to suffer either chronic pain or recurring flare-ups, experiencing interference with activities of daily living.

Considering that in some cases, no clear physical cause of low back pain can be found at all, yogic perspectives on low back pain should be examined. In Ayurvedic medicine, pain is generally attributed to a vata imbalance and treatment may involve detoxification, aromatherapy, grounding activities, and pranayama techniques. Low back pain may also indicate a blockage at the first chakra, which has to do with one’s feeling unsafe and insecure in the world. This fear is also related to an increase in Vata, so in addition to the above approach to balance vata, mantra and meditation supporting one’s safety and connection to “the one” is also indicated.

An example of a yogic approach to the treatment of low back pain might be as follows. 1) Detoxification through taking castor oil three times per week for one month to get rid of excess apana; 2) Yoga postures that promote focus and strengthening without reproducing back pain. For example, chair, warrior, cobra; also restorative postures emphasizing self-nurturing and care, relaxation, and stress reduction; 3) Strong even breathing emphasizing the inhale, especially into the areas of pain; 4) Aromatherapy with basil, frangipani, heena, or cinnamon; 5) Grounding activity such as gardening; 6) Imagery promoting strength, safety, courage 7) Mantra: “I am safe, I am secure in the world; I have everything I need to thrive in the world; I can make good choices for myself; It is OK to take care of myself.”

Sufferers of low back pain and sciatica often seek “cures” through western medicine that never quite pan out. In contrast, a yogic approach to this condition involves healing versus curing. This healing takes place through creating opportunities for changing one’s core beliefs and habits that underlie the physical symptoms. The result is greater integration of the whole person and a return to balance of their basic constitution. Along with this balance comes a relief of pain symptoms.

References for my report on low back pain/sciatica:

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