

# OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Dr. Joseph Baker

## Psychological Factors and Back Pain

*Every morning it's the same thing. As soon as Joe's feet touch the floor, the pain in his lower back starts up just where it left off the day before. It's bad enough that he's having problems at work. But now he's plagued with low-back pain too.*

*When spinal movement is restricted or spinal bones (vertebrae) become misaligned, it results in a condition known as vertebral subluxation. This common occurrence is the primary instigator of low-back pain (LBP). Dr. Baker corrects vertebral subluxations with safe and gentle maneuvers called chiropractic adjustments.*

*But in addition to visiting his chiropractor to alleviate his back pain, Joe may want to visit a career counselor as well. Joe's work stress could actually be playing a role in his LBP.*



Psychological distress can make an already bad back situation worse by creating negative connections between the mind, body and spirit. Dr. Baker knows that there is an undeniable connection between emotional and physical health. Consequently, our chiropractic office focuses on teaching patients to consider the emotional as well as physical triggers of disease.

One researcher explains that “in the past century, the [non-chiropractic] medical profession has taken pride in the rapid and often effective advancement of diagnostic technology, surgical interventions, and pharmaceutical remedies. However, it has also witnessed the unraveling of the woven connection among mind, body and the

human soul.” (*J Altern Complement Med* 2003;9:563-70.)

Addressing the whole person is a founding principal of chiropractic: a characteristic that sets this revolutionary approach to wellness apart.

Dr. Baker is committed to helping patients adopt the **chiropractic lifestyle**, a way of life that focuses on preventing health problems rather than merely masking symptoms with medication or allowing psychological pain to erode wellness.

### Studies Link Back Pain and Psychological Distress

It's no surprise to Dr. Baker that research shows that emotional strain leads to back pain.

“Psychological distress more than doubles later risk of low back pain,” according to British researchers who reviewed the health records of 5,781 people born in 1958. All of the 571 people who suffered from low-back pain (LBP) between the ages of 32 and 33 had suffered some form of emotional stress in their early 20s (*Am J Public Health* 2001;91:1671-8).



And, when researchers in Russia conducted physical and psychological tests on 337 patients suffering from back pain — and compared the results with 40 pain-free subjects — they discovered that those with back pain had a higher frequency of emotional tension than those not in pain (*Zh Nevrol Psikhiatr Im S S Korsakova* 2002;102:3-9).

Another study, this time by investigators in Denmark, revealed that “populations at risk [for LBP] would consist of people with a weak psychological and physiological constitution, who more easily than others may develop long lasting back pain.” (*J Electromyogr Kinesiol* 2004;14:129-33.)



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## Work Stress

Most people spend approximately one-third of their time at work. If that time is marked by unhappiness, stress and frustration, the result can be migraines, depression, anxiety, chronic heartburn and a host of other physical ills: including back pain.

In fact, some studies suggest that poor work satisfaction is the No. 1 risk factor for back pain.

For instance, researchers in Norway surveyed 4,266 nurses' aides. Prior to receiving their first questionnaire in 1999, the group reported either no LBP or minimal LBP. Three months later, 3,808 (89.3 percent) completed a second questionnaire, and 15 months later, 3,651 (85.6 percent) completed a third questionnaire.

In addition to organizational, psychological and social work factors — such as being on the night shift — researchers learned that a perceived lack of support from superiors “and perceived lack of a pleasant and relaxing or supporting and encouraging culture in the work unit, are associated with an increased risk of intense low back symptoms and LBP-related sick leaves ...” (*Occup Environ Med* 2004;61:398-404.)



An even larger study in Japan, which included 6,490 male and female school personnel, revealed that “low social support and low job satisfaction were related to LBP of school nurses despite low physical loads.” Male teachers — who worked with handicapped students and experienced more physical and emotional stress — had “significantly higher LBP prevalence.” (*Ind Health* 2002;40:266-71.)

## ‘Hidden’ Stress

It’s possible for both introverts and extroverts to have all of their psychological ducks in a row. But beware: Extroverts can cover up psychological pain by pretending (even to themselves) that life is just one big bowl of cherries. Introverts may do the same thing by fading back into the wallpaper of life.

If you are suffering from LBP — whether you are an introvert or extrovert — stop for a moment and take your psychological pulse. Is everything really OK, or are you simply covering up what’s bothering you?

Another question to ask yourself — Are you holding a grudge? If so, this “hidden” stress could be contributing to LBP. New research suggests that many patients with chronic LBP have difficulty forgiving people they perceive as having unjustly offended them in some way. Researchers from the Duke University Medical Center in Durham, NC, say that there is a definitive relationship “between forgiveness and pain, anger and psychological distress in patients with chronic low back pain.” (*J Pain* 2005;6:84-91.)

## Counter-Productive Coping Strategies

Cigarette smoking and overeating, two habits often used as coping strategies, further up the chances of developing LBP.

One study included 292 health-care workers from Spain, 40 percent of whom smoked. Researchers concluded that “smoking is associated with a higher risk of sickness absence among healthcare workers, particularly due to back pain.” (*Public Health* 2005;119:144-9.)

Another response to emotional stress — overeating — is also linked with back pain: particularly when it’s combined with cigarette smoking. In 1973, a group of 902 Finnish workers completed questionnaires regarding their lifestyle, work history and health. Researchers from the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health then compared that information with hospital admit-

tance records from 1973 to 2000. Heavy smoking and obesity were listed as the top contributors to disorders affecting the discs of the spine (*Spine* 2003;28:1860-8).



## Chiropractors Care About the Whole Person

Are you suffering from LBP? If so, make an appointment with your doctor of chiropractic today. Because regardless of what is sparking your LBP, one thing is certain: Chiropractic care can help! While you are healing, our patients are encouraged to identify and address any underlying stress or emotional factors that may be playing a role.

Chiropractic care has proven successful time and time again in preventing LBP. For instance, a review of 119 patient files from a private Canadian chiropractic clinic found that those who sought care for “mechanical neck pain or LBP had statistically significant reductions in their pain-related disability after treatment.” (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 2000;23:307-11.)

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