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Physical Therapist Treats Pain With Unconventional Methods

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BETHESDA, Md. --

For those with chronic, widespread pain, the condition can be life changing. Experts say many people never get effective treatment because they're not diagnosed properly.

One local physical therapist said he's using unconventional methods to offer hope to those who are suffering from chronic pain.

"It hurt when I was driving," said patient Janice Kaplan. "It would hurt moving my leg to and from the brake to the accelerator. It would hurt sometimes to put my clothes on. It hurt just doing the normal activities of life."

A year ago, Kaplan was suffering from chronic pain. She saw dozens of doctors, but no one could give her a clear diagnosis or any effective treatment. Then she went to physical therapist Jan Dommerholt in Bethesda. He ordered some tests and found something no doctor had ever mentioned to Kaplan: The level of iron and vitamin D in her system were both in the normal range, but on the very low end. Dommerholt told Kaplan that was causing her pain, and she started taking supplements.

"Within two to three months, I felt 100 percent better," Kaplan said. "It was that easy, but it really took a detective to figure that out."

"Most of our patients have been seen by others, usually for pain problems," Dommerholt said. "It can be for back pain, neck pain, headaches, any kind of pain problems. In spite of care by other physicians, they're still having pain and looking for answers."

Dommerholt said up to 90 percent of the chronic pain patients that come into his practice have been misdiagnosed or undiagnosed by physicians and therapists. He said he suspects it's because they're not looking into what's causing the pain. Instead, they're diagnosing based on symptoms.

"Sometimes it's a lack of thorough diagnostics that certain things are overlooked, that people may have or not have, and they're not thoroughly investigated," he said. "Once patients don't fit a particular mold, the chance patients get lost in the medical system is quite significant."

Dommerholt also uses some unconventional treatments. For example: dry needling, a technique similar to acupuncture. A small needle is inserted into a muscle's trigger point. He said pricking the trigger point relaxes the muscle and relieves pain.

Timothy Taylor said that technique helped him get over his chronic pain after more than three years of suffering.

"I was on the verge of disability," he said. "The doctors I went to made a variety of diagnoses. Some called it tendonitis, bursitis, fibromyalgia."

Dommerholt eventually diagnosed Taylor with myofascial muscle pain. After eight weeks of dry needling and injections of compounds like Botox, Taylor said he's now 95 percent pain free.

"It is essentially being reborn," he said. "I was a man in ruins, a man nearly beaten, nearly disabled by pain, and now I feel fully able to do everything that a man my age needs to do."

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