

“I don't think we're ever going to be completely pain-free. We're humans, pain exists for a reason”: A composite-narration of living with chronic pain, PTSD and opioid dependence

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Introduction: There is increasing evidence of associations between chronic pain, post-traumatic-stress-disorder (PTSD) and opioid dependence (OD). To date, there have been attempts to understand the illness experience of chronic pain, PTSD and OD as distinct entities, but the combined effect of the three conditions has not been studied. This qualitative study examined the illness and treatment experience of patients with comorbid chronic pain, PTSD and OD in an Australian opioid dependence treatment program (ODT) setting. Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 participants (aged: 36-62yrs, 5 female/5 male) who were receiving methadone or buprenorphine as ODT; experiencing chronic pain for more than 6 months; diagnosed with PTSD or complex PTSD according to ICD-11 diagnostic criteria. Participants were asked to provide narratives of their illness and treatment experiences in the context of chronic pain, PTSD and OD. Data were analysed using inductive coding and findings were synthesised into two composite narratives capturing shared pattern of meanings across accounts.

Results: The composite narratives reveal a trajectory of self-fragmentation and rejection of 'pain-self' due to chronic-pain and trauma. However, despite the added stigma and bodily betrayal caused by OD, participants narrated their resilience in integrating a coherent sense of self- “I don't think we're ever going to be completely pain-free. We're humans, pain exists for a reason”.

Discussion and Conclusions: Using the composite narrative methodology, we reveal the participants struggle of living with chronic pain, PTSD, and OD, alongside the capacity for transcendence and integration.

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