



## Stress Management: An Exploratory Study of Chiropractic Patients

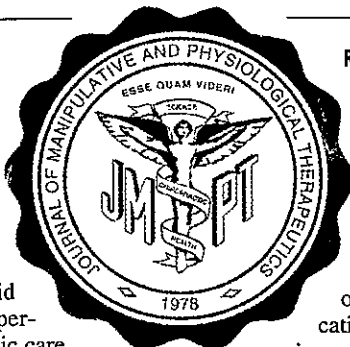
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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Stress is a recognized variable in the diagnosis, management, and prognosis of musculoskeletal conditions; chiropractic care is reputed to be successful in the management of stress-related visceral conditions. It may be useful for chiropractors to include stress management as a clinical care option.

**Objective:** To explore screening tools to aid stress self-assessment, investigate patients' perceptions of stress management as a chiropractic care option, and examine which stress-management strategies chiropractic patients perceive as most useful.

**Design:** A multiphase qualitative study with purposive sampling of chiropractic clinics to maximize the diversity of the patient population. Convenience sampling of patients was undertaken in a Western Australian case study, an inner city, and a national exploratory study. Data for the case study were collected by semistructured interview. Questionnaires and a self-assessed stress-management task were used to collect data from the inner city and national studies. Data was thematically analyzed, and results were triangulated.



**Results:** The sample size of chiropractic patients in the West Australian case study was 48, 15 in the Western Australia exploratory study and 36 in the national study. A number of chiropractic patients participating in this study perceive themselves to be stressed and were interested in having stress-management strategies included in their chiropractic care. Individual patients preferred different stress-management options. This qualitative study found little justification for routinely using a stress-assessment technique more complex than asking the patient to rate his or her stress level as absent, minimal, moderate, or severe. Exercise, particularly walking, was found to be a prevalent pastime among participants in the case study.

**Conclusion:** This study was too small to warrant statistical analysis; nonetheless, the results of this study are relevant because some patients believe they would benefit from chiropractic care that includes information about stress-management strategies. (*J Manipulative Physiol Ther* 2000;23:32-6)

**Key Indexing Terms:** Stress Management; Chiropractic; Patient Perceptions

### INTRODUCTION

People with stress-related conditions routinely seek and obtain chiropractic care. Chronic stress has been linked to clinical conditions ranging from musculoskeletal dysfunctions such as muscle spasm, backache, and fibromyalgia to visceral conditions including intrinsic asthma, menstrual disorders, hypertension, and migraine and tension headaches.<sup>1</sup> An Australian case study found that a percentage of chiropractic patients feel stressed and a substantial number of these patients feel it would be helpful if their chiropractic care included strategies to help them cope with stress.<sup>2</sup> The literature supports routinely including consideration of psychologic factors in the diagnosis and management of neck-

shoulder, back, and noncardiac chest pain.<sup>3-8</sup> Stress-management is also effective in a number of clinical conditions.<sup>9</sup> Autogenic training has, for example, been found to have a positive effect on patients with migraine, insomnia, asthma, and hypertension.<sup>10</sup> Progressive muscle relaxation and electromyographic biofeedback-assisted relaxation training, meditation, and hypnosis have been found to benefit mood, self-esteem, and certain biologic indexes in HIV-positive men.<sup>11</sup> A biopsychosocial approach to treatment of patients with asthma found that the majority of patients achieved sustained improvement.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to its effective management of the musculoskeletal system, chiropractic claims a measure of success in the management of stress-exacerbated visceral conditions.<sup>13-15</sup> Although somatovisceral reflexes are postulated to underlie improved visceral function detected after chiropractic care, the exact mechanism remains unproven. The possibility that psychosocial stress and its management may be one factor in the chiropractic management of these conditions has not been discounted. Advances in mind-body medicine suggest that processing within the nervous system does not distinguish between symbols and physical structures and that the neurobiology of the brain can be altered by perceptions,<sup>16,17</sup> explaining why chiropractic patient and practitioner perceptions of improvement are not always supported

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# The chiropractic adjustment: A case study of chiropractor explanations and patient understanding

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**ABSTRACT. Objective:** The explanations provided, and the patient's understanding of the chiropractic adjustment and how it works, was explored by means of a collective case study of Australian chiropractic practices. **Research Design:** Twenty-one chiropractic practices were visited and 25 chiropractor-patient units explored. Purposive sampling of practitioners was undertaken using a maximum variation strategy. Convenience sampling of patients was performed within each participating practice. Data was gathered from each chiropractor-patient unit, consisting of one practitioner and usually five patients, by means of practitioner interview, patient questionnaire, and interview, and in certain cases, practice observation. Thematic analysis of the interviews was compared with information derived from the patient questionnaires and validated by selective practice observation. Data was compared within and across chiropractor-patient units. **Results:** Chiropractors participating in this study provided an understandable explanation of why the chiropractic adjustment works and how it will be delivered. Patients, however, seemed to be more interested in the beneficial physical changes

experienced as a result of adjustment than in understanding the explanation for chiropractic effectiveness. **Conclusion:** Although the kinesthetic experience of chiropractic care seems to dominate the patient's psyche, chiropractors should continue to provide their patients with an understandable explanation of the chiropractic experience, as this is consistent with the imperative of informed consent and may enhance patient efficacy expectations.

**KEY WORDS:** Chiropractic Manipulation—Patient Care

## INTRODUCTION

In chiropractic practice it has been suggested that "the quality of interaction between the physician and the patient can be extremely influential in patient outcomes, and in some (perhaps many) cases, patient and provider expectations and interactions may be more important than specific treatments" [1]. It is also recognized that "the interplay between patient and practitioner expectations shapes the clinical reality that is negotiated in medical practice" [2]. Clinical interactions which enhance patients' coping skills, change their expectancies or alter their perception of stressors have the potential to influence health status. Under experimental circumstances it was found that coping behavior releases endogenous compounds which have brain and behavioral changes similar to that resulting from benzodiazepine administration [3]. Expectancies have also been reported, in certain circumstances, to override pharmacological effects [4, 5].

Patient expectancies are influenced by the therapeutic ritual, the practitioner's expectations, and

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