

Erica - Stress presenting as a physical symptom

Dr [Hi Erica nice to see you. How are you doing?]

Patient I'm alright. I just been having a really stiff neck.

Dr Hmm.

Patient I've been starting to get really bad headaches as well. Like in the back of my head. It's been really annoying.

Dr [How long has that be going on?]

Patient quite a while now, a couple of weeks. This past weeks been really bad for headaches.

Dr [Okay. All about your neck and your head.]

Patient It's starting to be my shoulder here. Just really annoying as well.

Dr [Alright. Anything else?]

Patient no

Dr [Was there some other issue you were planning to raise apart from your neck?]

Patient No that was it.

Dr [Any thoughts about what might be causing it?]

Patient No clue.

Dr [Never happened before?]

Patient No

Dr [Been doing anything that might have triggered it?]

Patient No

Doctor [Has anyone else said anything about this? Have you discussed it with anybody?]

Patient Yeah my dad thinks its my uni bag. It's a bit heavy on my shoulder

Dr [How heavy is it?]

Patient Pretty heavy

Doctor [Is it plausible? Do you believe that?]

Patient I don't know.

Dr [Are the rest of you muscles okay?]

Patient Yes, they're fine, it's just headaches are really annoying.

Doctor [Tell me more about those....]

Patient Just on the back here they're really like....

Doctor [Just on one side?]

Patient Especially this side here.

Doctor [So, head and neck?]

Patient Yeah.

Dr [All the time, or does it come and go?]

Patient It comes and goes.

Doctor [What makes it worse?]

Patient I think maybes like when I'm doing a bit more.

Doctor [So activity?]

Patient Yeah.

Doctor [Including carrying?]

Patient I don't know maybes like, say, when I'm sitting it's kind of alright. I mean my neck is sore, but I don't have a headache. But yesterday when I was at uni my head was like killing.

Doctor So, when you doing things it hurts more? So, when you coming back to uni and your dad thinks it's caused by carrying your bag. [Any thoughts about what it could be, or what you were worried it might be?]

Patient No, no clue.

Doctor [No, not read anything, or any alarmist reports, on the Internet, or from friends? You're well in yourself?]

Patient Yes

Dr [No fever?]

Patient No

Doctor [Not been travelling recently?]

Patient No

Dr [You look a bit anxious.] (Picks up on cue)

Patient Do I? I'm just going through quite a lot of the moment.

Dr [Can you tell me a bit more about that?]

Patient My boyfriend's got cancer at the moment.

Dr [Oh crikey. When was that diagnosed?]

Patient October. It doesn't help.

Dr [And how's he getting on?]

Patient He's on his fourth round of chemotherapy at the moment. Is in hospital right now but he's really unwell at the minute.

Dr [What sort of cancer is it?]

Patient Burkitt's lymphoma.

Doctor Okay. [So he's really going through it, isn't he? And so are you consequently.]

Patient I think we all are.

Doctor Yeah. [Do you think there could be a link with the stress and your pain too?]

Patient I think maybes yeah and because of uni to. I'm trying to keep up.

Dr [Are you managing to keep up?]

Patient I think I am. All the lecturers know and that's really helpful.

Doctor [Are you sleeping okay?]

Patient Nah. And that's another thing, my neck.

Dr [So that's affecting your sleep? So your sleep is affected and your tense and your muscles are sore. So they are all feeding off each other aren't they?]

Patient Ah ha. I'm sorry to get upset.

Dr No no no, it's helpful to know what's going on. [Can I check about your general health? Your mood is okay-ish?]

Patient Ah ha

Dr [Sleep not great, but eating okay? Weight's been fine?]

Patient Yeah I'm fine with my eating.

Doctor [And you just about managing to cope with university, but you've told your supervisors about that,] [and you don't need a note from me to take account of everything?]

Patient No I'm fine.

Doctor [And you're living at home..... with your mum and dad? And they know all about this don't they?]

Patient Yeah.

Dr Alright. [What were you hoping I would do for you today?]

Patient To be honest I don't know is just that is been happening for awhile, so I don't know.

Doctor [Can I just check there's nothing else going on then? So, no numbness in your arms or legs?]

Patient No

Doctor [On a pill?]

Patient Yeah

Dr [Which one?]

Patient Don't know. It begins with an "M".

Dr [Microgynon?]

Patient Yeah

Doctor [And happy with that?]

Patient Yeah, it's been fine.

Doctor [Not missed any pills or periods? Or anything like that?]

Patient No.

Dr [No chance of pregnancy at the moment?]

Patient No.

Doctor [And your general health is okay?]

Dr [Let's just have a quick look at your neck if that's okay. No lumps in your neck? Stand up for me and slip your jacket off, if you wouldn't mind. Pop your ear down to one side then down to the site. Turn your chin so you are looking that way, then the other way. That's great. Then put your arms up like that keep in there and don't let me pressing down. That's great.] [That's sore isn't it? So it's all muscular. Tension.] [Tell me bit more about your sleep and how that's been affected.]

Patient I don't like it. I like to sleep on my side but I wake up when I'm on this side. But it's annoying because I keep waking up in the night.

Dr [So, we have a number of options. So you've got the options and I'll try and put you in the picture so that you can choose the best option for you if that's alright?]

Dr [It's a muscular tightness, a lot of it is linked to tension.] [And relaxation techniques will often help this. So I can give you some or you can look them up yourself if you prefer? Often massaging will help.]

Patient I had my mum massaging it the other day.

Dr [And sometimes massaging a painkilling cream will help.]

Patient I had a hot water bottle on it the other day.

Doctor [Did that help?]

Patient Yes. It is little bit.

Dr [I quite often prescribe a cream called Algesal. Which is an anti-inflammatory painkiller but it's mostly just a massage that helps more than anything. So you could use something like that if you want to but there are some other options that could help you sleep a bit better. Particularly since you're going through so much and they could help you with the tension and the pain. So one option would be to use a tablet called amitriptyline. Amitriptyline, we used to use as a treatment for depression but we now often use it as a painkiller, or sometimes to help people to sleep. They does cause dryness in the mouth though and it can unwind you. So, if you have persistent problems we could use something like that. If you wanted. We could you could use a simple painkiller. But we don't tend to find that simple painkillers help much and aren't very constructive in the long-term.]

Patient I've been using a bit of paracetamol.

Dr [I wouldn't encourage you to use that regularly because it doesn't really help with tension. So relaxation techniques, understanding that it's a muscular tension rather than anything else and massage are probably the sensible things for you..... But you could explore other options that help you to have a more comfortable night sleep if you wanted to..... So rub on creams or maybe even amitriptyline if you wanted to..... Does anything grab you from all of that?]

Patient I think I might just try a cream.

Dr [I think it's probably cheaper for you to buy it over-the-counter unless you get free prescriptions?]

Do you want me to write that cream down for you?

Patient Yeah, please

Doctor [And you want me to give you any relaxation techniques.]

Patient I'll look them up. I'll be fine.

Doctor [If things are getting worse then by all means give me a telephone call.]

Patient I will do.]

Dr [I think understanding where it's coming from will help. There may be an aspect of the heavy school bag...because you're quite slight aren't you? And a big school bag with lots of books in it..] [So, it's muscular tension....] [I think having the chance to relax and share your troubles is often helpful.] [But if things are getting worse then please let me know.] [Any queries?]

Patient No. That's fine. I'll try this. Hopefully, it will work.

Dr My thoughts are with you.

Patient Thank you.

Dr You're welcome. Anytime.