ABSTRACT

Living with unpredictable everyday pain: Women's experiences of living with whiplash injury

Objectives

A whiplash injury is a common chronic pain syndrome which means living with a chronic illness that can lead to physical disability involving personal suffering. The literature on whiplash injury is extensive but the focus is mainly on treatment. The aim of this study was to describe how women experience living with a whiplash injury.

Method

A purposive sample of eight women with a whiplash injury participated in the study. They were recruited from a Rehabilitation Centre in northern Sweden and the inclusion criterion was that they had a diagnosed whiplash injury. The women were aged between 35–51 years (md = 44), all of the participants were living in a relationship and had children. All had been injured in a car accident and at the time of the interview, 2.5–17 years (md = 8.5) had passed since the accident. Personal audiotaped interviews with a narrative approach were conducted with the participants. The interviews were later transcribed verbatim.

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using a thematic content analysis. The interviews were first read through several times to get a sense of the content. After this, the text was divided into meaning units, guided by the aim of the study. The meaning units were condensed, and sorted into categories. The categories were then sorted into six themes, i.e. threads of meaning that recurred in category after category. Finally, the interviews were reread for verification and in order to validate the themes.

Findings

The analysis resulted in six themes: living with unpredictable pain; trying to manage the pain; having to live with limitations; not being able to work as before; needing support and
understanding; learning to accept. The findings showed that living with a whiplash injury means living with unpredictable everyday pain that affects the daily life in several ways. As the pain was unpredictable and could not be related to special activities women with whiplash could not plan ahead. Everyday life was limited and the women feared that the pain should dominate their daily life. The women with whiplash searched for alleviation from the pain and tried to manage it. As pain and other symptoms were invisible for others women with whiplash had been met by distrust. Support, acceptance and understanding were described as important to manage everyday life. Family and close friends provided the best support. Despite the struggle the women accepted that the situation was the way it was. They tried to choose things that were good for them, as the most important thing was to feel good.

Discussion

Everyday life was affected in many ways for women living with a whiplash injury. The unpredictable pain led to lack of strength and limited not only their abilities to perform everyday activities but also their working- and social life. In conclusion women needed support and understanding. Lack of support and understanding influenced their mood, and women with whiplash experienced that it was hard to be accepted by the surroundings. Thus healthcare personnel have an important task in supporting them, especially when the illness is invisible and misunderstood.