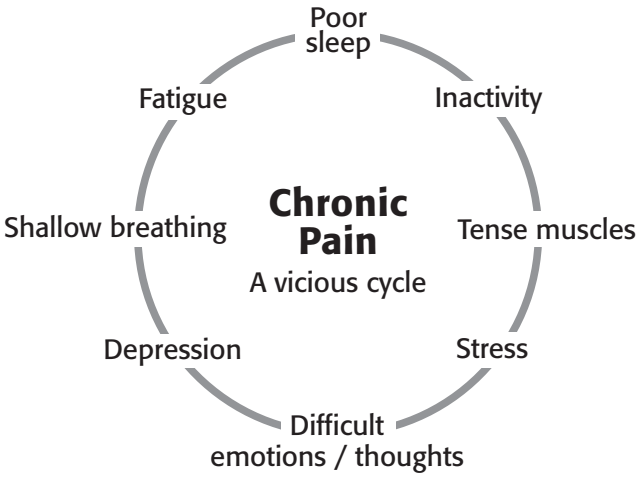

Figure 1.2 **The Vicious Cycle: Chronic Pain Symptoms**

in others (see page 5). For example, your body may release excess cortisol (a neurochemical released during stress). This release of cortisol can destroy tissues and cause more pain. Or your body may produce fewer endorphins (so-called feel-good neurochemicals), less serotonin (a neurochemical that plays a role in sleep and mood), and other neurochemicals that help regulate the body's response to pain, such as inflammation. It's as though your body can't keep up with the demand for helpful neurochemicals and instead makes too much of the harmful ones.

The emotional response to chronic pain is different from the response to acute pain. In a very real sense, chronic pain is a form of chronic stress. Chronic pain is associated with ongoing tension, fear, anxiety, fatigue, and difficult emotions such as frustration and anger. This can lead to feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and depression.

When you feel this way, nagging questions arise: *Why me? Why is the pain not going away? What do I really have? How can I explain this to other people when I can't understand it myself? What does the future hold?* All these questions and concerns are very real. But the big secret of dealing with chronic pain is that the answers to these questions don't really matter or help. The way to deal with chronic pain is not to look for causes but to move toward management. You may never know what causes your pain. Instead of obsessing about what causes your pain, be kind to yourself, learn and practice self-management, and resolve to get the most out of life.

The good news is that there are things you can do that may increase the levels of helpful neurochemicals, including exercise, relaxation and meditation, positive thinking, and even laughing. Throughout this book we examine ways to break the chronic pain symptom cycle by using self-management tools and skills and resolving physical and emotional helplessness. Exercise, for example, plays a key role in chronic pain management. Because exercise helps your body produce helpful neurochemicals, it is important