

Understanding my pain and how to help manage it

Why do we get pain?

- There are different types of pain that we can experience **ACUTE (initial) PAIN** e.g. following a recent injury or **PERSISTANT PAIN (chronic or long term)** e.g. which can occur after the initial recovery stage has finished.
- Pain is NORMAL.
- It can be a protective mechanism that causes us to think and act differently, but having pain does not necessarily mean that damage has been done.
- For example; some people may have **significant** joint **wear & tear** shown on x-ray but have **NO pain**, whereas others may show **minimal wear & tear** but have **huge amounts of pain**.
- It is thought that in some situations you can experience pain when your brain believes there is a threat to your body. i.e. the more you worry the more pain will be apparent. There may be a situation where you have a problem in your joints, muscles, nerves etc, but it won't hurt if your brain doesn't feel there is a threat to your body. In the same way, if no problems exist in your body you can still experience pain if your brain thinks your body is under threat.

ACUTE (Initial) Pain

- This is the pain we first experience after an injury, usually up to 1 week.
- An **inflammatory process** takes place in our body, which **produces chemicals** that then cause **swelling, heat and pain**.
- This is designed to **PROTECT** our body and alerts us to potential damage.
- From **week 2** onwards the body starts to go through a **healing process**.
- This involves **new tissue formation**, which can be laid down in a haphazard manner.
- **Early 'gentle' movement** can help to **realign new tissue** so they become more flexible and assist **normal movement** through our joints.
- From **6 weeks onwards** is the process of **re-modelling** the tissue. Continued **movement** and **strengthening** exercises are **important** to assist **maximum function**.

PERSISTANT PAIN

Why can pain last so long?

Even when healing and tissue re-modelling has occurred we can still experience pain. Persistent pain (also called chronic or long term pain) can occur for a number of reasons;

1. Certain conditions such as osteoarthritis (joint wear and tear) or rheumatoid arthritis can cause bouts of inflammation, or pressure on nerves resulting in cycles of pain.
2. Activities/hobbies or a persons occupation may create pain due to sustained or repetitive positions such as looking down, sitting, standing or kneeling regularly.
3. We often **change the way we think** during the ACUTE pain stage. The **brain** then **makes a pathway of pain** i.e. driving a car can become an **automatic activity** that we don't have to think about. Pain can also be automatic and **remains with us even after the initial injury**.

The pain pathway can be triggered by thinking about pain as well as stress & worries in your daily life.

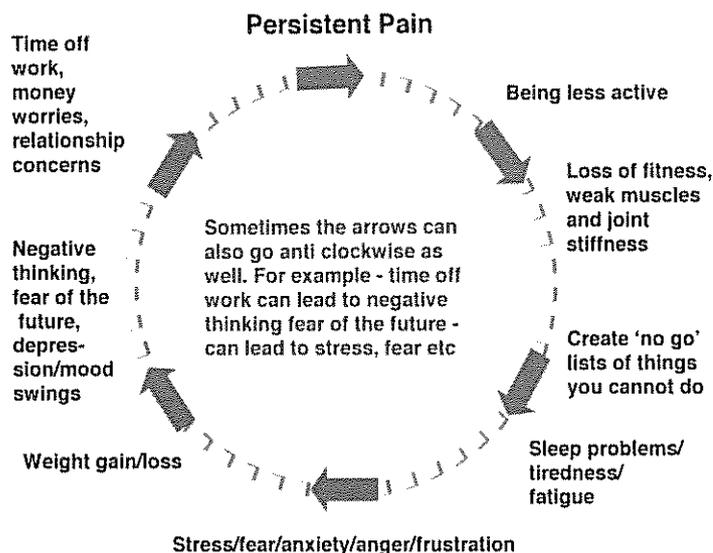
The environment can also cause this pain to increase i.e. certain smells may cause your pain to increase or places that you may associate with having pain i.e. work.

4. As we worry the brain produces "worry chemicals" which are picked up by the nerves in our body and then cause pain. This is our body's way of trying to protect us from damage.

Low mood & anxiety create more "worry chemicals" and therefore increase our experience of pain.

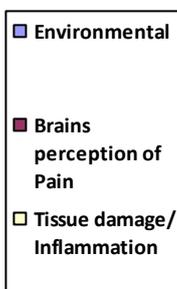
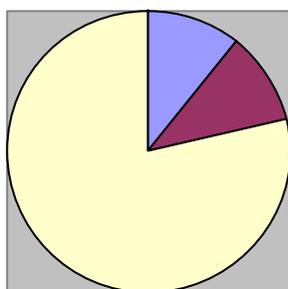
5. We also change the **way we move** during the ACUTE pain stage. This can increase the tension in our muscles and pressure on our joints and therefore cause more pain. This increase of pain can then cause us to avoid activity as a way of avoiding pain, which then follows a continued cycle of pain.

The Persistent Pain Cycle

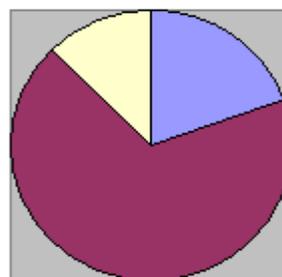


Acute pain v's Chronic Pain:

Acute pain



Chronic pain



Key: Brains perception of Pain (worry chemicals; -sensitive nerves – remember we can influence these by our activity levels, mood, thoughts/beliefs (i.e. this will hurt so I'm not doing it, or it's painful so something must be wrong)

Environment (smells, tastes, the things around us – things you associate with pain can trigger the pain response)

Often your healthcare professional will have used a number of different treatments to try and decrease your pain that is associated with tissue damage, however as you can see from the pie charts, this is just a small portion of the pain experienced. Only you can make a change to the other portions.

Accepting that you have chronic pain

Accepting chronic/persistent pain can be difficult but when you do, it will be easier to start the process of taking ownership of your pain (not relying on healthcare professionals) and to start to manage and control it.

How can I take control of my pain?

1. Start by thinking about how your mood, the environment, your behaviour/activity levels and how the people around you affect your pain. Refer back to the pain cycle or pain pie charts, how you can alter one of these areas/segments?
2. Is there anything you can change? Small changes can make a big difference to your pain levels. For example;
 - a. take the pain medication as prescribed by your GP or over the counter medication
 - b. use a warm or cold pack; cold packs are usually more effective on hot, swollen joint or new injuries. Warm packs can help with stiff, aching joint and tight muscles
 - c. do the exercises given by your physiotherapist. Gentle exercise is essential to decrease worry chemicals/dampen sensitive nerves, prevent weak muscles, stiff joints (things that create more pain)
 - d. Participate in low impact activity such as swimming, walking, Tai Chi, Pilates
 - e. start an activity you used to enjoy; gardening, walking (start small and build up)
 - f. try a tens machine; this can sometimes be helpful for long standing or severe pain. Discuss loaning a TENS with your physiotherapist
 - g. manage your mood; speak to friends and family, visit your GP, access a local group/activity
 - h. spend time with people that make you feel good
 - i. learn to relax (i.e. meeting friends, reading, listening to music)
 - j. social interaction, gentle exercise, doing things you enjoy encourages the happy chemicals (endorphins) and helps decrease the worry chemicals

3. Try to increase your activity levels without significantly increasing pain (and “worry chemicals”); start small and build up

Prevent a ‘boom & bust’ pattern.

‘Boom’= Feeling good and so doing excessive activity and much more than you would usually do.

‘Bust’= by doing a lot more excessive activity when feeling good you may cause excessive pain, which then prevents any activity. This causes an increase in the “worry” chemicals; leading to more pain, less activity, stiff joints, more pain etc. and the cycle continues.

4. PRIORITISE, PLAN AND PACE your activity

- Set goals, i.e. Monday am do the ironing/pm go swimming
- If pains starts after 10 mins ironing then start by only doing it for 5 minutes, gradually build up the time you do this for
- Plan in a rest break to prevent the ‘bust’
- Monday pm – swimming, plan the number of lengths/widths (if pain increases later that day or the next day then you’ve done too much so lower your goals for next time)
- As your brain gets used to the increased activity without pain, it will start to worry less and therefore produce less “worry” chemicals and your nerves will start to become less sensitive
- Eventually you will be able to do more without pain