

Understanding pain

Key messages

What is pain?

This seems like such a simple question.

If you are reading this, you probably have considerable experience with pain. You know what pain is. It is complex. Real. Difficult to change. A protective mechanism.

All pain is real.

Pain is changeable — you have some influence over it.

Pain is a protection mechanism we all need.

- When pain persists the nervous system becomes more sensitive. Everything reacts as if gentle movements, muscle contractions and pressure on the body are somehow dangerous. Over time, it starts to take less movement to increase pain. The sensitivity of the nervous system is changeable in many ways.
 - When pain persists, more and more things in our lives change. Pain affects everything. It changes mood, sleep, appetite, and all our relationships (friends, family, sexual, social and work). You can learn ways to influence how pain impacts your life.
 - When pain persists, your sensory systems monitor all input from your body and from your environment more closely. If there is even the slightest hint of threat, pain may be experienced. You can influence this.
- When pain persists, the nervous system can be so wound up and overly sensitive that it produces constant 24 hours/day pain, even when you are not moving or stressing your body. You can learn how to decrease its sensitivity.
 - When pain persists, there are changes in many automatic processes in your body — heart rate, breathing, muscle tension, response to stress, balance, hormones, immune system, etc. Pain affects every system in the body. With practice, you have the power to reverse some of these changes.
 - When pain persists, more and more things start to affect the pain. Just as pain changes everything, everything changes pain. You can learn what triggers pain, and examine how you respond to those triggers — whether the triggers are specific movements, postures, or life stresses.

With time and diligence, you can change your nervous system so that it becomes less and less sensitive to the things that trigger it.

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We must shift our focus away from *only* fixing the tissues, and focus on changing the overly-protective and sensitized nervous system.

There are many ways to do this!

Here are a few to consider ...

- Learn more about how your pain system works. Become an EXPERT.
- Learn to breathe calmly again.
- Learn to release excess muscle tension.
- Practice becoming more aware of the non-pain sensations from your body.
- Notice how you may be misinterpreting (as threatening) signals from your body and from your environment.
- Practice changing how you interpret information from your body.
- Become aware of how your body responds to what you think and feel. Decide whether these are helpful responses.
- Practice changing how you respond to what you feel.
- Change the way you stretch and strengthen your body.
- Challenge your body and your nervous system in the right way.
- Notice whether these strategies provide more relief the longer you practice.

Request guidance by an experienced regulated health care professional. Although your medical doctor may not have the time to teach you pain self-management techniques, ask for input into any treatment approach you follow to help with your pain.

DO NOT be too reckless or timid

Start with activity/movement in which you have just a bit more pain.

Ask yourself

- Is it safe to do this much activity?
- Will I regret this later?

Continue at the edge of increased pain, only if you know it is safe and you will be okay later, while you do three things:

- Keep your breath calm.
- Keep your body and muscle tension low.
- Monitor the pain. Do not ignore it, pay too much or too little attention to it.

Practice, compassion, persistence, and patience are all necessary to be successful in pain management.