

## 17 – Understanding Chronic Pain

Experiencing pain is normal. Everyone experiences pain now and then.<sup>1</sup> Pain is supposed to be a protective experience to make sure you stop doing things that may be dangerous.<sup>2</sup> But chronic pain, that is pain that has persisted for more than 3 months, is no longer protective, nor informative.<sup>3</sup> Let's look at what chronic pain is and what you can do about getting rid of it.

All pain is created by your brain, because your brain has decided that you are threatened or in danger and need protecting.<sup>4-10</sup> The interesting thing here is that you don't actually have to have any actual tissue damage to feel pain.<sup>10-12</sup> And if your brain is not aware of tissue damage, you may not feel any pain at all, even when you've injured yourself.<sup>4,6</sup>

Chronic pain is the second-most common reason people see a doctor and miss work.<sup>13,14</sup> More than one-third of people with chronic pain become disabled by their pain to some degree.<sup>14-16</sup> Chronic pain can be mild or excruciating, it can be episodic or continuous, it can be merely inconvenient or totally incapacitating. The pain can be from headaches, or joint pain, it can be neck pain, back pain or pain from an injury. Other kinds of chronic pain include tendinitis, or sinus pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, and pain affecting specific parts of the body, such as shoulders, elbows, wrists, hands, hips, knees ankles or feet.

The common thing with all these types of pain is that the actual feeling of pain is always, 100% of the time, created in your brain.<sup>5,8,10,12,17,18</sup> This does not mean it's not a real experience – you know if you have felt pain that it is a very real experience - but understanding that the pain itself is created in your brain has major implications for how you can get rid of it. And because pain depends so much on what you think and feel about the pain,<sup>2</sup> it's very important you understand pain properly.

Your pain experience depends on why your brain has decided you need to be protected – why it's creating the feeling of pain for you in the first place.<sup>2,14</sup> It can therefore be very useful for you to try to figure out why your brain may be creating pain for you. What was happening at or around the time your pain started. What makes it worse? What makes it better? Why is this so important? Because we know that the brain can be retrained,<sup>19</sup> so you need to use all the tools available to you to retrain your brain out of pain.<sup>19</sup> Some of the keys to retraining your brain are staying active,<sup>20-22</sup> staying positive,<sup>23</sup> eating well,<sup>24,25</sup> and sleeping well.<sup>14,26</sup>

Today let's look at why staying active is so important. Your posture and how you move plays an important role in how you feel and how you experience pain.<sup>21,22</sup> Even as little as a short walk every day can help.<sup>22,27,28</sup> If there are movements, you cannot do because of your pain you can still help yourself by imagining those movements.<sup>29</sup> We know from neuroscience research that imagining a movement influences the brain in a very similar way to actually doing the movement.<sup>29-31</sup> This can help to retrain your brain to understand that the movement is not dangerous – because imagining doing the movement will not hurt. You can basically trick your brain into giving you back pain-free movement.<sup>29</sup> Play with these sorts of things. Make movement fun. Move in different emotional states, like when you're happy or grateful. Move outside – in the sun, in a park with beautiful plants and flowers. Or move in water.

The movement of your spine is also very important.<sup>32</sup> Yoga or simple spinal exercises can be great for this and chiropractic care may be really important to help you move too.<sup>33-36</sup> The main focus of chiropractic care is to improve the movement and function of your spine.<sup>37-41</sup>

This is so important because proper movement of the spine helps the brain to know more accurately what is going on, not just in the spine, but also elsewhere in your body.<sup>41-43</sup> And chiropractic care is already well known in the research literature to help people who suffer with back pain,<sup>44-47</sup> neck pain<sup>48-50</sup> and some types of headaches.<sup>51-53</sup> This is most likely because chiropractic care helps the brain know more accurately what is going on in the spine and body<sup>41 42 54</sup> and may help the brain to switch off the feelings of pain, when they are no longer needed.<sup>41</sup>

So, if you suffer with chronic pain do your best to stay positive, move often, eat well, sleep well, and go see your family chiropractor to help retrain your brain out of pain.

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