



Managing Emotions with Chronic Pain



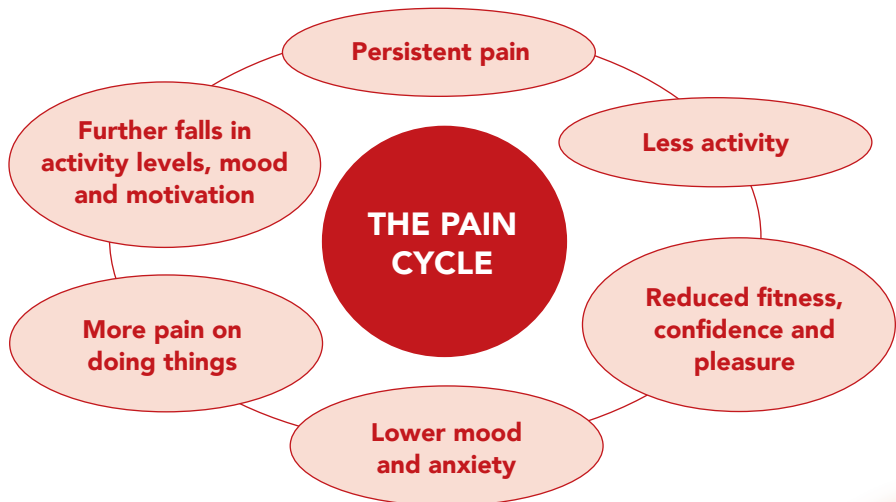
Dr David Craig and Katy Gordon

This leaflet is designed to help you think about how chronic pain can give rise to difficult feelings and thoughts. We'll look how this can affect your life, and how to address these emotional effects of pain.



Chronic pain can have a big impact on day-to-day life – relationships, daily activities, sleep, employment and all aspects of general health can be

affected. These changes cause emotional strain on top of the pain. Many people experience a 'vicious cycle' which can make pain harder to deal with.



To think about how pain gets mixed up with emotions and the other things going on in our lives, healthcare professionals use what's called a 'bio-psycho-social' model as shown on the right.

The bio-psycho-social model recognises that all three areas interact in our overall experience of pain.

This leaflet focuses on the emotional part of the pain experience. Without always having a clear picture of the cause of the pain or a recognisable diagnosis it can be difficult to consider the emotional side of pain without thinking 'so it is all in my mind?'

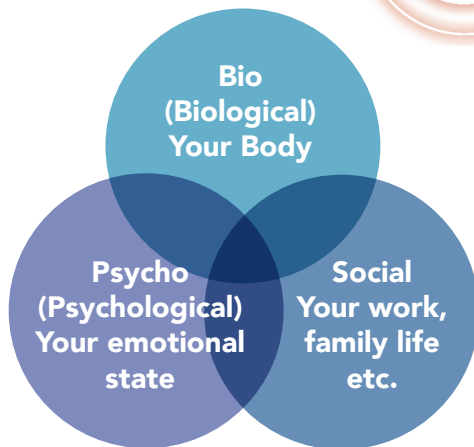
'They said it was "all in my head"'

It is common for people with pain to feel they have been told that pain is imagined, psychological or all in their head. This in itself can be very upsetting. We asked a GP why people might leave the consultation room feeling this way:

'GPs ask patients about how they're feeling or how life is because we recognise pain can be affected by these factors, not that they're the main cause. The skill we have to develop is reassuring them that we're looking at all of the factors behind their pain, and it's not that we think they're mad.'

You might leave your consultation wondering:

- Why do they want to talk about how I am feeling?
- Why are they asking me about my life?



- Why won't they focus on my pain?

Thinking about the bio-psycho-social model of pain helps to explain this – healthcare professionals ask these questions to get as full a picture as possible. Another GP said:

'Knowing where they are in life, what their family situation is, other things that are going on in the family, what they might be worried about, how they feel they have to limit themselves or push themselves. You need to have that discussion with them.'

It does not mean the GP is not interested in the physical aspects of your condition. Looking at the full picture of your pain and how it affects you (including your emotional wellbeing), could mean that they are better able to help you deal with the whole experience, putting together the different parts of the jigsaw.

How might chronic pain make me feel?

There is no 'one-size-fits-all' answer. Emotions and thoughts differ from one person to the next and over time. What we do know is that the emotional impact can be long lasting and overwhelming, partly because of changes to the brain caused by chronic pain. We spoke to a wide range of people with pain about some of the negative feelings and thoughts that they have experienced:

So you're then having to ask somebody to do the basic stuff like cooking, cleaning and ironing. You feel **guilty** you're not doing it yourself. It makes me feel **inadequate**.

You think, 'Am I really in this amount of pain?', 'Can I really not just go and do that?' and it does have a terrible effect on you. I was **very low**; I was **suicidal** for a few years.

I think we're **frightened** to let go of our old life because you're thinking you might get worse.

So I get the idea pain can affect my mood – so what?

People in pain often talk about 'carrying on regardless' or 'pushing through' and may feel that ignoring difficult emotions is the best approach. However, recognising some of the negative feelings and thoughts you may experience can be helpful in managing your pain in the long term, as well as reducing some of the suffering it can cause.

Managing your emotions

The close links between the centres of pain and emotion in the brain make it almost impossible to have pain without having negative emotions as well.

Recognising the emotional impact of chronic pain can be a first step towards being able to manage both pain and emotions better. This might include becoming more aware of how you are feeling in the first instance. Becoming gradually more active, eating well, developing some better sleep routine strategies and planning for flare-ups can all help manage the emotional side of the pain. (See Pain Concern's other leaflets covering these topics.)

Other people have found these things helpful in managing their emotions:

1. Don't stop doing things. Activity can provide pleasure and a sense of achievement, even with pain

When you are feeling low you might not feel motivated to do the things that you usually enjoy like spending time with family and friends and other social activities. However, avoiding enjoyable

things can further entrench negative feelings. Try to keep doing the things you enjoy and spending time with the people you care about however discouraged you feel.

2. Take a step back

When we feel low, we can often get caught up in believing a range of very negative things about our situation, the future or ourselves. Taking a step back to notice and observe what you're feeling and what you're saying to yourself can often be helpful. We can see things more clearly from a distance sometimes.

3. Give yourself some credit for the things you HAVE done

Day-to-day activities and responsibilities become hard to fulfil when living with pain. It's important to recognise what you ARE doing. No one can do everything every day.

Acknowledge whatever you've managed to achieve despite the pain. On your worst days try to find even very small things in the day that will give you a little bit of pleasure, or give you a small sense of achievement.

Friends would ask, 'You going out?' – 'No, I couldn't possibly go out!' – 'Do you not want to try going out for some tea?' – 'I DON'T WANT TO GO OUT!' I was really defensive because I was so angry that I couldn't lead a normal life.

Instead of keeping a pain diary, what about making time every day to log an entry in a journal for 'My Achievements'? Make sure you give yourself the credit you deserve.

When I'm at my worst I say to myself, 'as long as I get dressed, I will not be depressed'.

4. Identify triggers and learn to deal with them

Very often the same patterns make us come unstuck. Look at what led up to the way you are feeling. Is there something (not necessarily the pain itself) that always triggers stress, upset, etc.?

How you react to things and what you say to yourself can trigger upset in the same way as the pain can. Is there a way to become more aware of the triggers so you can make a choice about how to respond?

5. Watch out for how thoughts affect your state of mind. Be kind to yourself!

Be aware of any tendency to judge yourself or your situation, or to assume that things will turn out for the worse or that others think badly of you. When in pain you may have a tendency to criticise yourself.

Simply becoming more aware of what you are saying to yourself can be helpful. It allows you to step back and see thoughts for what they are – just thoughts.

Could you learn to give yourself the support you would give to a close friend? Recognising and celebrating even small successes, gently encouraging yourself when the going gets tough.

6. It's ok to ask for help and accept it when it's offered

To manage the intensity of pain we need a team of people around us who we can call on for support – family, friends, colleagues or neighbours. Who could you turn to on a really bad day?

You're going to have really bad days. But I try to be aware of how my thoughts, and not doing things might make things even worse, and try to deal with these.

Speak to your GP. If your mood is very low or you feel very anxious or frustrated, don't expect to manage all of this and your pain by yourself.

Try a support group for people in pain in your local area.

7. Explore resources

- Tips on managing emotions, including looking at your thinking: moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk
- Tips for managing your pain: paintoolkit.org

It was very hard to accept that I was depressed. The GP kept saying to me, 'I think you really have to take medication to balance things out a bit'. I was able to discuss options with her about how to improve how I was feeling. I was so against it, but when I did start to take it I did begin to notice a change in my mood.



- Pain Concern's leaflet *Stress, Pain and Relaxation* has guidance on managing stress and relaxation exercises
- Pain Concern's website (painconcern.org.uk) has lots of information on managing pain – explore the self-management videos to hear other people's experiences
- Connect with other people in pain through a local support group (find local groups in Scotland on aliss.org) or online on Pain Concern's HealthUnlocked forum
- Courses can be taken online (l1ttf.com) and Computerised CBT (cCBT) can be

available from your GP in some areas. Improving your mood is not a cure for chronic pain. Managing thoughts and feelings can be difficult and you may have to work on it for a while before you see any benefits. However, eventually, feeling more positive may reduce the pain and the amount of suffering associated with it.

I have noticed that if I have a really bad day I can be in a bit more pain or if I'm in a good mood the pain is maybe not quite as bad.

Dr David Craig is Consultant Psychologist at NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde
Katy Gordon was Pain Concern's Research Officer

Thanks go to the people living with pain and the healthcare professionals who advised us on the content of this leaflet. This leaflet was originally produced with the support of the Health and Social Care Alliance and has been revised with support from the Scottish Government Wellbeing Fund.

If you would like to know more about the sources of evidence consulted for this publication, please visit painconcern.org.uk.

Managing Emotions with Chronic Pain © David Craig and Katy Gordon. All rights reserved.
Edited by Tom Green and James Boyce. **Revised April 2019.** To be reviewed April 2022.
First published as 'Managing Emotions', September 2015.



Informing the Pain Community

- Living a full life with pain
- Evidence-based treatments and the latest research
- All aspects of pain management

Airing Pain radio programme

radio | podcasts | online

Pain Matters magazine

news | features | opinion

Award-winning research

videos and Navigator Tool

Online community

on HealthUnlocked

Helpline

Call **0300 123 0789**

Email **help@painconcern.org.uk**

Accredited leaflets

Find out more at **painconcern.org.uk**

Pain Concern

62-66 Newcraighall Road, Edinburgh EH15 3HS

T: 0300 102 0162

Charity reg. SC023559, Co. Ltd. by guarantee SC546994

