

How to Move Well with Chronic Pain

Step 1: Get Started

Written for PainChats by Neil Pearson, Physiotherapist.

Exercise is Good for Pain (but it's hard to start!)

Many people who have persisting pain want to (or understand that they need) to exercise. But even small movements or changes in activity level can leave them worse for hours or days. It feels that doing their best to take a step forward pushes them back even further.

People who experience persistent pain may try many different exercises, or even try not moving the painful area at all, to improve their situation. But it's not uncommon that the pain actually spreads, rather than improves.

Painful movement feels as if the tissues are still damaged. Knowing about sensitivity and the protective buffer between pain and tissue damage might be enough to make movement easier, but it is something that needs to be improved with practice.

Pain and your Sensitive Nervous System

Persistent pain can be described as an "overly sensitive" nervous system. For someone used to moving comfortable and easily, this comes as a surprise. Pain can come from seemingly minor things such as small everyday movements, stress, and poor sleep. Even a small bump in a car might trigger more pain.

Persistent pain is your nervous system active in a way that is overly protective of you. Pain works as a warning sign that is trying to keep you from doing things that could trigger or repeat some damage done in the past, but this pain can continue long after any damaged tissues have healed.

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Since the pain is related to the sensitivity of the nervous system, it can be changed for the better even if the pain has lasted a long time after the initial injury. Your body and your nervous system is always learning and adapting, at any age.

Learning about Pain and the Brain

When someone experiencing persistent pain understands the issue related to an overly sensitive nervous system, they can seek out a professional who knows about pain, sensitivity and how the nervous system works. Many doctors are likely to suggest various treatments, but it's worth seeking out a specialist like a physiotherapist that has developed skills in helping people with ongoing pain.

It is common to be sceptical about the steps that people can take for themselves to decrease the body's sensitivity and even influence it in a positive way. After experiencing pain for so long, it can be difficult to imagine that you have the capacity to change the way your body reacts to situations that have become painful. But only when you change your approach to recovery will you see any significant and long-term change in your persistent pain and importantly, knowledge is the first step to success.

When your nervous systems have become sensitised, moving with ease is difficult. When you start trying to move again, your nervous system is overly protective. With practice and time, it gets easier. Making adjustments and running experiments will help and having the confidence to do so makes a big difference. Having a knowledgeable and supportive health professional to guide you also makes progress easier.

After an injury, even when the tissues have healed, your nervous system can react to any compression, stretch or activation of sensitive tissue, or movement of the body part, as if it is highly dangerous. It's a similar experience to the heightened tension you might feel after watching a scary movie. Until there is less evidence of danger, that sensitivity will not calm down.

Making Movement Safe Again

Learning about pain is the first step to increasing the safety of movement. Knowing that pain signals “danger,” not damage, is a way to help you feel safe to move with more ease. When you move mindfully, with breathing and a focused attention on the movement, the first pain is you feel is never damage. It’s your body warning you that going further might not be safe.

When you move to this edge, you are safe from damage. That first increase in pain is a chance to question whether continuing the action is safe. Asking that question allows your thinking brain to make sense of the situation. It makes you consciously aware of what’s happening rather than reacting to pain with fear, anger or panic.

When you find a movement that you know is not dangerous to your body, even though you are at the edge of increased pain, you are using the power of knowledge to change your sensitivity. Resetting the automatic message that it might not be safe with the knowledge that it is safe is one way to change your sensitivity and pain.

This is not Denial, it’s Discernment

Using knowledge to change your sensitivity to pain does not mean you can grit your teeth and think “mind over matter” and endure the pain. Pushing through pain might work in the short-term, but it is exhausting and unsustainable in the long term. It does not send a message of safety to your nervous system, so the pain won’t reduce.

The way you have some level of control over your pain is by understanding what the signals mean for you. Recognising what the pain signals mean can help you find a movement that you’re more confident you won’t pay for later, and then you can build on that.

The sensitivity of your nervous systems is influenced by many things, including how you breathe, how tense you are, what you think, and what you predict about the future. Moving well again is also influenced by many things.

The tension in your body, breathing, whether you ignore pain during exercise, your thoughts, emotional state and what's happening around you; all of these impact recovering movement as much as they do sensitivity. The more you practice influencing the sensitivity of the nervous systems, the more skilled and effective you become at influencing them.

Learning to move well again with pain is an exploration and sometimes it's scary. If you experience persistent pain but haven't tried movement this way, give it a try. Attempting to change too much at once can feel impossible. Start with observing where you first feel pain, knowing that it is a warning sign and not damage, and asking yourself if it feels safe, and if you will feel all right later. If you have a physiotherapist, ask if there are treatments you can receive to decrease your sensitivity as you explore these movements.

Personal Notes and Reflections

1. What information did you read here that is relevant to your pain experience?

2. What did you read here that surprised you, or that you disagree with? Why do you think that is?

3. Are there any actions that you want to take after reading this information?

You can use your responses here to talk to your health professionals, or you can email your questions to the **PainChats** team via hello@painchats.com