7 Steps to Recover from Chronic Pain

Written for PainChats by Alison Sim, Osteopath

Recovery from Chronic Pain

Many people experiencing chronic, or persisting, pain do so for years. They receive many treatments like surgery and medications, but their pain often continues, and stops them from living the way they want to.

Ongoing pain does not have to last forever. Education about the science of persisting pain can help pave a way to recovery. The hard part is getting started by moving past the point of thinking that getting better is impossible.

Recovery is possible. Everyone's experience of pain is unique, but there are key learnings that can be taken from people who have experienced and recovered from continuing pain conditions. There were seven key themes that emerged from Alison Sim’s “Pain Heroes” book, a collection of stories from people who have recovered from persisting pain.

They are:
1. Defining recovery
2. Feeling safe
3. Taking back control of life
4. Finding stories that work
5. Making sense of grief and loss
6. Finding the tipping point
7. Being ready for change.
Recovery from Pain, Defined

For those who experience pain, there is no single definition of recovery. It may be that physical function returns fully and life looks similar to how it was before the pain started. For others, full function may return, with some level of pain, but they no longer define themselves as a person in pain.

Your recovery may include various pain management and movement strategies, ways to manage flare-ups and a recognition of early warning signs that signal your need to look after yourself more. Part of recovery involves having permission to set boundaries about what they need to feel well and to practice self-care.

If you have a clear idea of what recovery means to you, you and your health care coaches can create strategies and steps to get you there.

The Importance of Feeling Safe

Pain feels scary, worrying and upsetting. Part of the pain experience is that pain feels threatening, even when there’s little damage to your tissues.

Pain education helps people understand how pain is dependant on perceptions of “danger” and “safety” in their body and the world around them, and to make sense of the sensations they are feeling. Understanding that pain is a protector can change the way you interpret pain in your day to day life and get back to living well.

Feeling safe again is critical. Knowing that pain is caused by many factors, and is not always a sign of damage shows your pain in a new light. Talking about fear and worry helps you to make new stories about their experience. Feeling safe allows you to start new activities, return to past hobbies, and experiment with different strategies to test your tolerance and stimulate positive changes.
Getting Back in Control of Life

Many people experiencing pain feel powerless to control it and that it has overtaken their life. Only once someone understands their tissues are physically safe and that their pain is influenced by many factors can they start to gradually improve.

Active treatment strategies for pain are a critical part of regaining control. This includes exercise and movement, but also includes approaches to relaxation, distraction, thought management, and goal setting. In combination, these provide the power to solve painful challenges.

One seemingly contradictory observation made by those experiencing pain is that to regain control over their lives, they needed to let go of control over pain. When a person understands that the experience of pain can be strange and unpredictable, they can accept temporary setbacks and challenge the protective boundaries that pain puts on their life.

Finding the Best Way to Learn about Pain

Understanding pain is essential to feeling safe again and taking back control of life. This can happen in many ways. Some find reading books or online information useful. Others prefer a teaching relationship with a group or an individual as the best option. Direct experience of how change is possible, like doing new activities with reassurance and support, is also a powerful way of challenging old beliefs about pain.

The most important element is not the method of learning, but that your old beliefs about pain can be gently challenged and reconceptualised to understand that change is possible.

Acceptance, Grief and Loss

Grief and loss is tied up with pain experiences. Loss and grief are intimately connected to how pain affects someone’s life, and seems to be inseparable from the pain itself.
For many who experience chronic or persistent pain, other stresses and anxieties are often present within their lives, some as a consequence of their pain. Relationships and careers can be damaged beyond repair when someone experiences long-term, debilitating pain and this sense of loss is real and must be acknowledged to allow positive change to occur.

Understanding that loss is a part of your experience of pain, and moving to a place of acceptance needs to be part of your journey to change things for the better.

**Turning Pain Around**

It can be hard to get good help for persisting pain. Not all experiences with healthcare professionals are positive, and finding clear and good quality information and support can be a challenge. Sometimes it’s difficult to know who to turn to, or that there are ways to approach pain that don’t necessarily include medications or surgical intervention.

Learning about pain and trying new things requires trust in yourself and your team, and commitment to the journey. Building a relationship with trusted health professionals, where you feel safe to ask difficult questions and have hard conversations, is an important part of the recovery process. Compassion and empathy from healthcare professionals is an important element to helping you understand that there might be effective and unexpected approaches to turning around your pain experience.

**Readiness for Change**

For some people, understanding and accepting how pain persists, and that change is possible takes repetition and time. You might not “get it” straight away. This can happen when anger, sadness and loss get in the way and a quick-fix seems more important than learning about pain.
Changing your pain requires time and needs to switch to an active approach. This “active approach” might not be just physical activity, it could be active stress management or supportive talking. Getting to this point might take more than one attempt. Hearing messages repeatedly about the ability to change is sometimes needed to get someone to try something new. You can only approach your pain in a new way when you’re ready to do things differently.

**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