

Understanding Chronic Pain

In this material, we will explore the various aspects of Chronic Pain to help you better understand and manage the condition.

What is Chronic Pain?

Chronic pain is pain that persists beyond the normal time for tissue healing, typically lasting for at least three to six months. It can result from various underlying conditions or injuries.


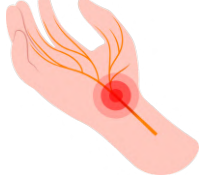

The Difference Between Acute and Chronic Pain

Acute pain	Chronic pain
A normal response to injury or illness and usually resolves as healing occurs.	A pain response that lingers long after the initial cause has healed.







Causes of Chronic Pain



Chronic pain likely results from a combination of factors. Here are some of the possible causes identified so far:

Injury	Previous injuries, such as fractures, sprains, or surgery. The pain may persist long after the initial injury has healed.	 An illustration of a right hand with a white medical bandage wrapped around the wrist and forearm.
Medical conditions	Medical conditions such as nerve damage, inflammation, chronic headaches and musculoskeletal issues.	 An illustration of a right hand with a red dot on the palm and several red lines radiating from it, representing nerve damage or inflammation.
Psychological factors	Emotional stress, anxiety, and depression. Sometimes, the pain itself can lead to development of psychological distress, creating a cycle of pain and emotional distress.	 An illustration of a person in a blue shirt holding their head with both hands. Above their head are several yellow lightning bolts and question marks, symbolizing stress, anxiety, or confusion.

Risk Factors for Chronic Pain

While chronic pain can affect anyone, several risk factors can increase the likelihood of developing the condition:

Age	<p>Chronic pain can affect people of all ages. However, as one ages, the likelihood of experiencing natural wear and tear on the body increases, and there may be a higher chance of encountering harmful events or injuries that leads to chronic pain.</p>	
Gender	<p>Research indicates that women tend to have lower pain thresholds and tolerance, making them more susceptible to experiencing higher levels of pain intensity and unpleasantness.</p>	
Family history	<p>A family history of chronic pain or pain-related disorders can increase the risk.</p>	
Lifestyle factors	<p>Poor posture, sedentary lifestyle and obesity may increase the risk of chronic pain.</p>	

<p>Occupational hazards</p>	<p>Jobs that involve repetitive motions, heavy lifting, or exposure to harmful substances may increase the risk of chronic pain.</p>	
<p>Physical trauma</p>	<p>Experiencing physical trauma to the body, such as a car accident or physical injuries, can lead to long-term pain, especially when complicated with other conditions (e.g. post-traumatic stress disorder).</p>	

Impact of Chronic Pain

Physical Effects on the Body

Chronic pain can affect various body systems, leading to:

- Restrictions in physical tasks, including lifting and carrying heavy items, reaching or engaging in physically demanding activities.
- Lowered tolerance levels, making it challenging to sit, stand or walk for long periods of time.
- Extreme tiredness, difficulty staying alert and decreased energy levels.
- Interference with sleep, leading to insomnia or poor-quality sleep.



Psychological Effects

Chronic pain is often associated with emotional distress, including:

- Persistent feelings of sadness and despair that make it challenging to find joy in everyday life.
- Anxiety, triggered by the unpredictability of pain, the fear of future episodes, and worries about how it might affect your life.
- Anger and frustration due to disruption in your daily routines and limited abilities.



Emotions can be experienced on a spectrum. Feeling a bit sad or anxious may be manageable on your own, but if emotions escalate to a point where you experience significant distress or depression, do approach your family and friends, and healthcare providers (if needed) for additional support.

Social and Lifestyle Changes

Living with chronic pain may bring limitations that can impact relationships and overall quality of life:

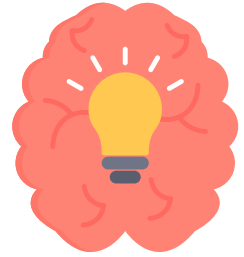
- Social withdrawal caused by the discomfort or emotional distress you experience, making socialising seem daunting.
- Relationship strain with family and friends as they might not fully understand what you're going through. Communication about your pain and emotional state can sometimes be difficult.



Cognitive Changes and Work Performances

Chronic pain may be associated with cognitive changes and reduced work performance:

- Cognitive difficulties such as problems with concentration, memory and decision-making, often referred to as "brain fog" have been reported by some people with chronic pain.
- Missed workdays to take necessary time-off to address pain or recover from related treatments.
- Attending to work despite pain to maintain job security, alleviate financial strain, or demonstrate commitment despite persistent pain. However, this may affect your focus and efficiency which reduces your ability to fulfil work responsibilities.



Understanding the Pain Experience

Role of Thoughts and Beliefs in Pain Experience

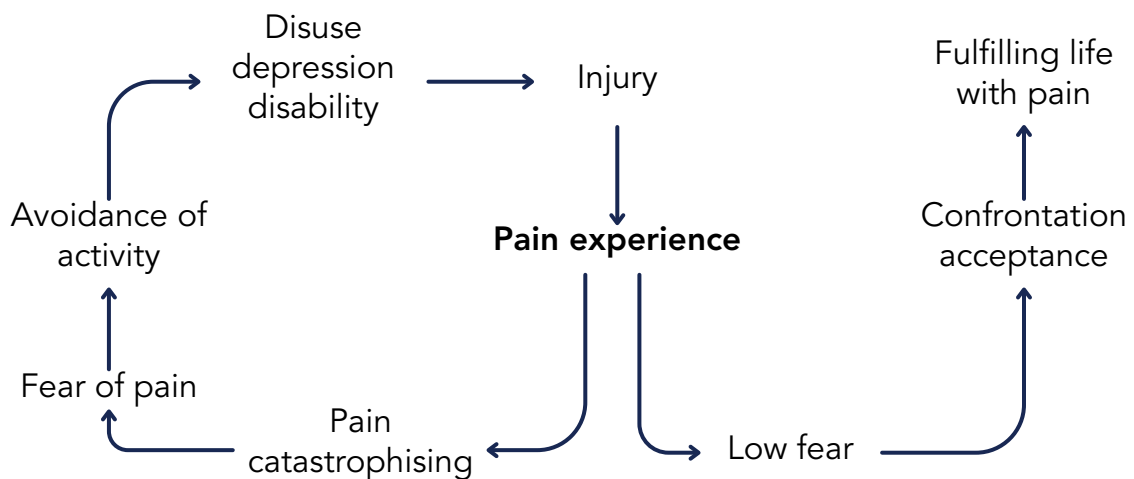
The way you think and what you believe about your pain can either intensify or alleviate how you perceive it. Your thoughts and beliefs have the power to either heighten or ease the way you experience pain.

Pain Catastrophising

Catastrophising is when you magnify the negative aspects of pain and interpret pain as an indication of a worsening condition or new injury. Someone catastrophising over pain might think, "There must be something wrong with me that the doctors have not been able to detect. My pain is going to get worse, and I might be disabled. I will never get better."

Fear of Pain

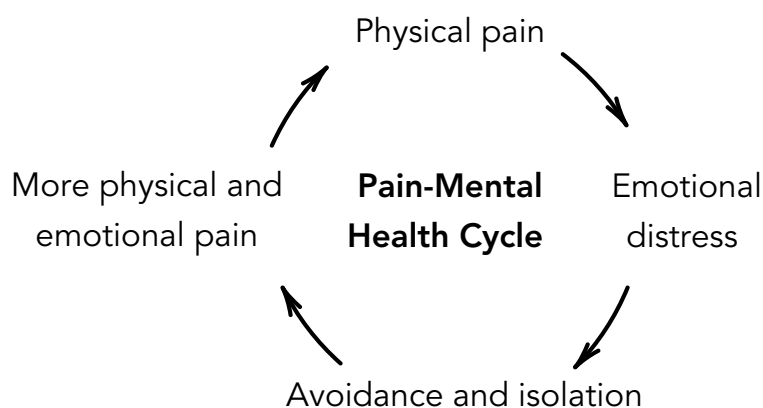
When you are in pain, you might avoid doing certain things because you are afraid the pain will worsen. Avoiding such activities might give you some relief at first. However, in the long run, it can reinforce your belief that certain activities are dangerous. This cycle of fear and avoidance can lead you to be less physically active and more sensitive to pain.



Instead, choose to face activities without being afraid of pain. Over time, you might notice that the pain lessens, and you can do more without feeling so tired. You will be able to do things you enjoy and have a more fulfilling life, even with pain.

Mind-Body Interaction in Pain Experience

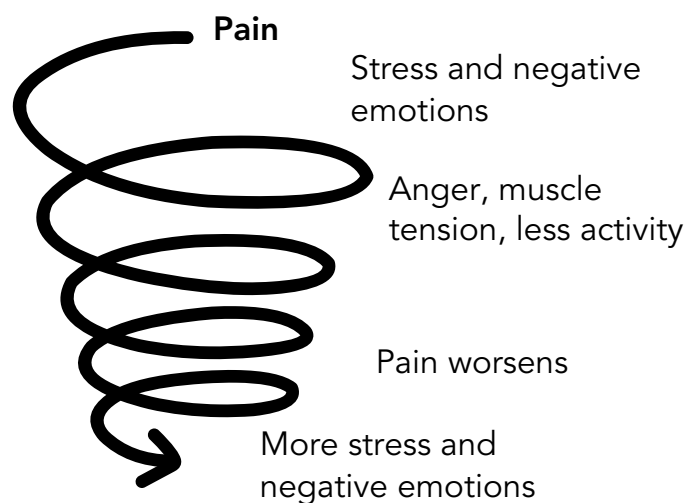
The relationship between chronic pain and mental health is often referred to as the Pain-Mental Health Cycle. Chronic pain not only affects your body, but also how you feel emotionally. This constant pain can cause anger, frustration, depression and anxiety.



Emotional distress can intensify your perception of pain, and increased pain can lead to more emotional distress. For example, when you are stressed or anxious, your muscles may tense up, exacerbating your pain.

The Downward Spiral

In chronic pain management, a downward spiral can happen where pain triggers stress and negative emotions, possibly leading to reactions like anger, muscle tension and less activity. The less active you are, the weaker your body becomes, making the pain feel even worse.



Breaking this spiral involves managing stress and finding healthier ways to cope with emotions, gradually facing activities and building strength to improve overall well-being despite the presence of chronic pain.

Pain Management Approaches

Chronic pain can be effectively managed through various treatment approaches, including:

Pain Medications

- Various over-the-counter medications and pain medications prescribed by your healthcare provider can provide relief.
- Work closely with your healthcare provider to find the right balance between pain relief and managing potential side-effects.
- Make sure to take your medications as prescribed to effectively manage your pain.



Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is a collaborative process where a trained psychologist works with individuals in a safe and confidential setting. Psychologist engages individuals to address lifestyle changes and manage mood shifts resulting from pain, offering holistic care to improve their well-being and quality of life.



Work with your healthcare provider to determine the best approach for your unique situation. It is important to communicate openly with your provider about your progress and any concerns you may have.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about Pain Management

1. Is there a cure for chronic pain?

There is no direct cure for chronic pain. Chronic pain is often managed to reduce symptoms, improve quality of life and help individuals learn how to handle and take care of their pain condition. The recommended approach in the long run is self-management, either with or without medications, especially for those who do not need surgery.

2. Should I stop doing things because of pain?

It is normal to feel unsure about doing activities when you are in pain. Try breaking activities into smaller parts, take breaks and go at your own pace. Gradually start doing things again, setting small goals. These will help you manage pain and feel better. Talk to your healthcare provider for a plan that fits your needs.

Chronic pain management is a journey that can have ups and downs, and requires patience, resilience, and ongoing effort. By learning about your condition, adopting effective strategies and staying motivated, you can enhance your ability to live a fulfilling life with chronic pain.

Contributed by Psychology (Allied Health Services)

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