

Pain Management

Dr Lizbeth Wilson – Counselling Psychologist

One in five Australians have chronic pain. **Chronic pain** is defined as an acute injury that is ongoing for at least six 6 months and the continuous pain has not resolved.

How does one cope? It is often a big wake up call for people to learn about their **Mind-Body connection**. Or in this case the Body to Mind connection!

“I am not crazy! I just have pain. Why do I need psychology?!” The answer to that question is that constant pain affects your mental and emotional wellbeing.

Chronic pain changes A LOT! Almost every aspect of your life is altered. The most common psychological diagnosis with chronic pain is referred to as an **Adjustment Disorder**. This is because people typically struggle to adjust to their new body and subsequent identity. And with the lack of adjustment, the diagnosis frequently includes depression and/or anxiety.

Most people have the solution which is to ignore their pain. It is best to acknowledge it and recognise what you need to do to manage it.

Pain management and stress management are closely linked. Pain creates stress, and so many of the strategies overlap with the management of your stress. Stress creates pain!

It is important to learn **diaphragmatic breathing**. The diaphragm is a muscle that sits just under your lungs. It is the muscle in which when you expand it like Santa Clause’s belly and then suck it in like you are trying to demonstrate you have slimmed down...that’s the muscle you use to breathe!

To continue, in through the nose, as you expand your belly, taking in air through the bottom of your lungs. The oxygen goes up to your brain as well to help you feel more awake and alert. Then exhale through the mouth. This helps you to lower your centre of gravity, feeling centred and grounded.

Words of warning, do not hold your breath too long in between these steps, but rather for one or two seconds only (otherwise you can hyper ventilate).

This is the breathing that induces relaxation! How wonderful is that!

Any **mindful relaxation** method at this point is encouraged, to help with sleep or simply to unwind and destress. Note the conversation you have with your pain. Yes, you read that correctly. Your **self-talk** can get quite pessimistic and/or catastrophising as you go through another day of pain. The key is to minimise in your thinking. However, on saying that the common mistake is to try to ignore pain. This is typically done by doing something to distract yourself. This leads to overdoing.

'Boom and Busting' is when you have a good day you overdo it. Then you pay the price, usually the next day. Then you experience a flare- up of pain, creeping up the pain scale of 1-10 (with 10 being the most extreme). Often this is ignored until you feel better and then start the cycle over again. Everyone has their own cycle, but the point is, is that this pattern over time increases your pain to come on sooner, and it also gradually diminishes your ability to undertake tasks.

So, what is the solution? **Pacing** is what is needed. The motto is: "On a good day, don't do too much and on a bad day, still try to do something." That creates a sense of normalcy in your life with the 'good' days and the 'bad' days not so diverse. You will have more control and you will be able to plan things in your life as it will boost your confidence to have more good days than bad ones.

How to pace is important. The key to pacing is to break up tasks into doable and manageable parts. You need to plan your break as well. A break is not just going on your phone. No, it is if you have been standing-- to then sit down, and vice versa, and to hydrate, do a stretch, and yes, a diaphragmatic breath while you are at it.

People tend to give into their rationale why they didn't or couldn't or wouldn't pace, often connected with a sense of mastery of a skill or protecting one's ego. These are necessary to explore and realise that these do not do any favours for you now.

Also, having a **Flare-up Plan** is essential. You need to be kind to yourself and know exactly what to do when the pain escalates. Everyone with chronic pain has occasional flare-ups. The key is to conquer it so that it does not become a Set-back, which is when the pain goes longer than three days. These need to be managed right at the onset.

Lastly, **sleep hygiene**, or having a set structure to your sleep routine is so very important. No nanna naps and keep to your structured routine. When you manage your rest and sleep, and are active with walking or the hydro pool during the day, you will have a better Rest/Sleep-Active-Wake cycle. Chronic fatigue needs to be managed, so that you can engage with your life.

It is even more difficult to manage pain and your moods when you are tired, because you have the tendency to become extremely irritable, frustrated and angry. These emotions create a lot of tension, which in turn, increases your pain. If you are tired it is challenging to remain active. And activity is important.

Fear-avoidant behaviour is when you decided not to move because it creates pain, believing you will do more damage to your injury. However, most often it is important to keep moving. If your pain is due to an injury, most likely it hurts because it is already damaged, not because you are creating more damage. (This is one of the major differences between an acute injury and a chronic injury.) This is something to discuss with your physiotherapist or exercise physiologist, etc. They will inform you that it is vital to keep moving, such as stretching and walking. Otherwise your muscles will atrophy (shrink and become weaker), making it more painful for when you need to actually engage and do a task.

So, in conclusion, keep a daily awareness of your pain management rehab program, rather than to dismiss your pain. Make de-stress relaxation a part of your daily routine. Also, remember to pace, apply a pain flare plan, keep to a sleep routine, and engage in some kind of daily movement. And keep seeing your **pain psychologist!**

Key Idea:

Chronic pain is best managed not by ignoring it, but by combining pacing, movement, relaxation, good sleep, and self-compassion to regain control and improve quality of life.