

# Chronic Pain



## How do I know I need help with my chronic pain?

People experience chronic pain in many different ways.

When we stub our toe or if something scratches our arm we experience pain. We need to experience pain in order to alert us to possible danger or damage. These feelings are necessary for our everyday survival as we need a system that tells us how to avoid terrible injury. Our bodies communicate to us all the time and tell us when we need to attend to an injury or modify our activity so that we don't cause further damage.

Most experiences of pain are *acute*. That is, even if pain is severe, it is usually temporary. The experience of acute pain, although usually very unpleasant, is a helpful protective mechanism, a way in which our body communicates with us.

Chronic pain is quite a different matter. Pain is said to be *chronic* if it occurs for a period of greater than three months. We do not really know what causes most types of chronic pain (not including malignant or cancer related pain). What we do know is that it is usually not a helpful communication tool that our bodies use. That is, it is usually not a "warning system" that alerts us to the possibility of further damage. Unfortunately, people often misinterpret chronic pain as indicating that further damage is occurring. Chronic pain, in fact, appears to serve no useful purpose at all.

While many people are able to carry on their usual activities despite chronic pain and modify their lifestyle to accommodate for it, others might become severely disabled and/or distressed by it.

Interestingly, the same type of injury in any two people can result in very different experiences of pain. This is because it's not just the actual physical experiences that affect people, but also the way in which people cope with their condition. Research suggests that what people do in response to their pain has a significant effect on how much that pain becomes disabling or distressing.

If not managed effectively, chronic pain can lead to a number of problems in addition to interfering with your life. It can also lead to job loss, financial difficulties, relationship difficulties, a decrease in usual activity, depression, anxiety, and insomnia. What chronic pain really amounts to for some people is not just the pain itself, but excessive suffering. If you have a prolonged pain condition that is adversely affecting your life, and if it is causing you excessive suffering then you might need help with it.

### **What treatments are available for chronic pain?**

By definition, acute pain usually goes away quite quickly. Sometimes the cause is clear and can be dealt with via medical interventions such as surgery (eg. removing a tumour) or medication (eg. antibiotics for an infection). Chronic pain is harder to treat as the cause is usually unclear.

Unfortunately, however, it is often the case that physical treatments (such as medications, massage, acupuncture) do little to relieve chronic pain. This can be a disappointing and frustrating experience for the person experiencing chronic pain. It can often be very difficult to accept that there is little that can be done to treat the pain itself. Often at times people have to learn to live with incurable chronic pain and the good news is this is distinctly possible.

### **What can a clinical psychologist do about my pain?**

It is not at all unusual for people with chronic physical problems to be referred to a clinical psychologist. Clinical psychologists can teach people how they can modify their behaviour and thinking so that they can lead more satisfactory and fulfilling lives *despite ongoing pain*. The main aim of psychological treatment for chronic pain is to help the person experiencing pain to minimise their overall suffering. This type of treatment does not cure the pain itself, but it can help teach people techniques for coping with the pain and for addressing the problems in their lives that the pain has caused. Clinical psychologists are an integral part of most good pain management teams.

Most clinical psychologists practice **cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)** which is proven to be a highly effective intervention in the overall management of chronic pain. In essence, this approach involves helping people to (1) develop ways to change unhelpful behaviour patterns (such as learning how to pace activities and learning relaxation techniques), (2) modify unhelpful and negative thinking patterns, and (3) work through current problems in life that might be contributing to the pain or that might be a result of the pain. It is a relatively short term treatment approach which usually occurs over a few weeks. The length of time and the specific format of treatment will depend on the sufferer's individual concerns, but remember, CBT can significantly help people achieve more despite pain.