

SOMETIMES, UNFORTUNATELY, CHRONIC PAIN DOES OCCUR AND THOSE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED IT KNOW THE STRESS AND CONFUSION IT CAN CAUSE AS YOU SEARCH FOR A SOLUTION.

# CHRONIC PAIN:

## PAIN IN THE WHAT? PAIN IN THE WHERE?



At some point in our lives we all experience pain. Pain serves a vital function to warn the body of potential injury and without it we couldn't survive. However, living in constant pain is not normal. Chronic pain is a condition that lasts for three months or more and continues after the injury or condition is treated.

What makes us experience pain? The body's nervous system is like an alarm system composed of the brain and countless individual nerves.

When you touch a hot oven rack with the back of your arm when pulling something out, your body immediately responds. Thank goodness, the nervous system, working like an alarm, ramps up and sends a message to the brain prompting you to take action (move the arm away from the oven). Usually, the alarm gradually calms down, the burn heals over time, the pain is gone and you are left with a healthy nervous system.

Unfortunately, in approximately one in four people, the alarm system does not properly calm down after ramping up, but stays extra sensitive for various reasons that are often not obvious. Sometimes it can be related to the severity of the injury and the factors involved in how traumatic it was, stress in life, fear of further injury, lack of experience with injuries, general health and the list goes on.

To explain why this happens we'll use an analogy.

Think of the brain as the conductor of an orchestra and the nerves as the instruments. With chronic pain, there is a miscommunication between the conductor and the orchestra. The instruments get confused and can play out of sync. Trombones (nerves that tell our brain about pain) play too loudly and overpower the sound of softly playing clarinets (nerves that tell our brain about pleasant sensations).

This confuses the conductor (the brain) so he tries to get the clarinets to play louder. In response the trombones become louder still, and eventually all one can hear is the trombones. The problem is that sometimes the conductor can't figure out how to control the trombones so he gives up. In time, the conductor thinks this is the normal way the song should be played. But it isn't. This is what happens with pain; the pain-producing nerves learn to overpower the more pleasant sensations and the brain just accepts that's the way it's going to be.

The out-of-sync orchestra is a major reason why some people continue to experience pain. Before the onset of this pain, the orchestra could play a variety of songs but now all we hear are the trombones.

What is the best way to deal with chronic pain? Try to avoid it in the first place. Physiotherapists are here to guide you through a successful rehabilitation program after an injury and help you properly manage

your pain during your recovery. They can also help to address poor coping skills and early signs of poor pain management.

Sometimes, unfortunately, chronic pain does occur and those who have experienced it know the stress and confusion it can cause as you search for a solution. Luckily, physiotherapists are also well equipped to devise treatment plans designed to calm down the trombones and help regulate the out-of-sync orchestra.

Listening is key to truly hear the client and understand their situation. Each person's pain experience is unique to them. It is critical to have the client involved in their own program in terms of understanding their pain, jointly setting goals and stressing the importance of doing their strengthening and stretching exercises and aerobic exercise. All of these have been shown time after time to help in the management of pain.

Education is key in helping the client re-conceptualize their pain and understand what is happening in their nervous system. It is important for the client to understand that tissue pathology found on X-ray or MRI is not always related to or even the cause of their pain. For instance, 40 percent of people with no low back pain have disc "bulges" and yet continue on with their non-painful lives. But when people who have chronic pain see that they have disc bulges on imaging they often cling to that as the source of their issues and have difficulty accepting that perhaps it is not.

Most treatment programs a physiotherapist suggests will include aerobic exercise. Even 10 minutes of aerobic exercise at a very moderate pace has been shown to decrease pain. Manual therapy when combined with exercise has been shown to be even more valuable. As well, things like meditation, education, proper breathing patterns, good sleep hygiene and activity pacing have also proven valuable.

To learn more about what can be done for your pain, contact your local physiotherapist.

Joanne Carswell is a physiotherapist at Vista Place Physiotherapy. You can find Joanne and other great physiotherapists in the Find a Physiotherapist section of our website at [mbphysio.org](http://mbphysio.org)

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