

Chronic Pain

The experience of chronic pain is quite different to that of acute pain. In simple terms, researchers have shown that pain signals don't just go up to our brain, but once they reach the brain they send signals to volume controls within our nervous system. These volume controls can turn the pain up or down automatically in response to the brain's perception of threat. How we feel about pain, how we interpret it, and how we respond to it, influences the pain intensity.

It is recognised in many people with chronic pain that there is often a problem with what they have been told about their pain, what they do about it and how they learn to manage it. If this problem goes on for a prolonged period the nerve pathways to the brain can become sensitised. That is, less of a threshold needs to be reached in our receptors for a pain signal to be initiated. Therefore although an original injury has healed, pain can persist for long after because the nerve pathways have become more sensitive. Long-term pain usually means the brain has misinterpreted signals and the pain isn't serving a useful function.

There are many other factors which can influence our pain volume. For example, exercise and distraction turns our pain volume down. Many persistent pain sufferers consistently report feeling better immediately after exercise.

Another important pain control mechanism is our mood. For example, when you are stressed or depressed, the pain volume is turned up - this is why pain often seems much worse when we are feeling frustrated, gloomy, under pressure or simply tired.

The table below shows some other things we can do which can turn our pain volumes up and down. Through the programme you will be using many strategies to help you to take control of your pain volumes.

Turn Volume up
 (Open gate)

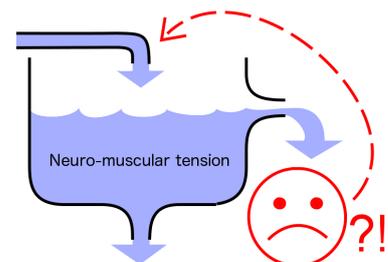
- Overdoing it – boom/bust
- Muscle tension
- Lack of exercise/activity
- Negative emotions – anger, catastrophising, anxiety

Turn Volume down
 (Close gate)

- Graded activity
- Relaxation
- Regular exercise
- Positive emotions – relaxed, optimistic

The Bathtub

Negative life events
 Worry / tension
 Poor quality sleep
 Low mood
 Anger / fear
 Feeling useless
 Too little/much physical activity
 Boredom/
 Introspection



Understanding the pain
 Pleasurable physical activity
 Relaxation
 Connection with others
 Sense of meaning and purpose
 Acceptance
 Distraction/fun