

Emotional impact of living with persistent pain

(Trust-wide services)

Other formats

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- 01392 402093 (for Mid Devon, East Devon and Exeter services)
- 01271 314090 (for North Devon services)
- rduh.pals@nhs.net

Living with persistent pain can be tough. Understanding our emotional responses can help us to cope better and reduce the impact that pain can have on quality of life and functioning.

We are all born with brains and bodies that we didn't design but that can be very tricky to manage. There are some important facts to be aware of:

Shared emotions

The emotions that we experience are shared universally with other human beings, and can be pleasant or unpleasant. Emotions have evolved to help us cope with our environments.

Our brains can be tricky to manage

We are not born with an attached guidebook to explain how to use our brains, and they can be very tricky to manage. Although most of us would choose to feel happy all of the time, each different human emotion has a function.

Our brains are evolved to react on a 'better safe than sorry principle'

An unfortunate 'side-effect' of this is that we're all very sensitive to threats and our brains can sometimes over-estimate threats and dangers because that's how they are designed to work. Therefore, we have to work at being calm and relaxed, because the human brain has been designed to go on to the defensive very quickly (i.e. getting anxious or angry).

Life is difficult

As human beings our lives are limited, we all age, lose people and things we care about, have physical illness and disease, and can be hurt in our relationships with people. This is true whether or not we suffer with persistent pain (although pain can, of course, be a major source of suffering). We often feel alone in suffering. Remembering that all human beings suffer can help reduce feeling isolated and cut-off from other people in coping with persistent pain, which can, in turn, alleviate depression.

Avoiding or blocking out feelings

It is understandable to attempt to deal with and manage difficult emotions in this way. Although this can sometimes be a vital coping strategy, to cope with/reduce negative emotional states we sometimes need to support ourselves to face and work with our feelings.

Feeling overwhelmed by negative emotion

This is also an understandable and common response to being in pain. Through mindfully noticing our emotions and gaining a better understanding of what triggers our 'threat' system we can create space to respond helpfully to these experiences.

Understanding our tricky brains: The three emotion systems

Human beings have evolved a range of emotions. Broadly, these can be mapped onto three systems; Threat, Drive and Soothing/Support.

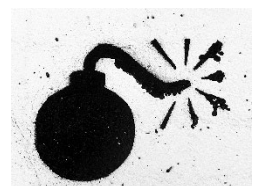


1) The THREAT System:



The function of the threat system is to rapidly detect potential danger, giving rise to intense bursts of feelings such as anxiety, anger or disgust. These feelings affect our whole physical bodies, alerting us, and urging us to take action to self-protect. The threat system sometimes activates us to run or fight, or inhibits us, so that we freeze, submit or stop doing things. The threat system will also be activated if there are threats to the people we love, our friends, or our family. Although the threat system is a source of painful and difficult feelings (e.g. anxiety, anger, disgust), it is also important for us to survive and thrive.

Unpleasant physical symptoms themselves are a major trigger for the threat system. For example, the unpleasantness of pain is designed to make us pay attention to the source of the pain. Whilst this is useful responding to acute pain (e.g. this propels us to seek help and medical assistance), threat system activation is less helpful responding to persistent pain, as, with persistent pain there is usually no on-going threat to the body's tissues, and little that can be done to 'switch off the pain'. The threat system is associated with a specific physiological response (see stress management hand-out). Importantly, when the threat system remains activated then this can contribute to further "winding up" of the body's



central nervous system, which can make persistent pain worse (see the Explain Pain hand-out). In this case, the body needs to be reassured that there is no danger through relaxed normal movements.

There are also a number of secondary reasons we can move into threat mode when experiencing unpleasant physical symptoms. The symptoms can be a major threat to our relationships, our roles, our hobbies and our working life. It can be difficult to express the experience of pain as it cannot be seen or felt by another person.

Stigma (being negatively judged and evaluated by others) is another key issue for people coping with persistent pain. We can also have thoughts about being judged by others (e.g. worrying that other people think that the pain is not real or that it is exaggerated) or we can judge ourselves (e.g. criticising oneself for not being able to do things or for 'letting other people down').

All of this means that it is normal to be in 'threat mode' when we experience persistent pain.

2) The DRIVE System:

The function of this system is to give us positive feelings that guide, motivate, and encourage us to seek out things and resources that we (and those we love and care about) will need in order to survive and prosper. We are motivated and pleased by seeking out, consuming and achieving nice things (e.g. food, place to live, comforts, friendships, and so on).



If we win a competition, pass an exam, or get to go out with a desired person, we can have feelings of excitement and pleasure. When balanced with the other two systems, the drive system guides us towards important life goals. Imagine what life might be like without the drive system, you would have little motivation, energy or desire. Indeed, in depression people can lose some of the feelings that this system provides.

The physical symptoms of persistent pain (e.g. pain and fatigue) can make it very difficult to achieve our desires and goals. Previously manageable activity can activate the threat system through increasing physical symptoms. Persistent pain can also cause us to think in threat-focused ways when thwarted with our goals. Our thoughts in turn increase our feelings of frustration, anxiety, and disappointment (threat) when in-fact we were seeking the positive experience of 'drive.'

The drive system is also sometimes used to avoid threat (e.g. blocking out unpleasant feelings/ avoiding judgment). Unfortunately, this may not help us to resolve distressing aspects of our lives, and can lead to increased physical symptoms (e.g. through not working with the body and over-doing activity).

3) The SOOTHING/SUPPORT System:



The soothing system is vital in recovery, it can be thought of as our 'rest and digest' system and it enables us to bring calmness to our bodies and minds and is also linked to feeling playful and creative. Our brains are designed for social interaction, and the soothing system is part of the evolutionary system that allows us to become calm when

feeling supported or safe (by ourselves or with others). It is associated with feelings of contentment and warmth.

Contentment is a form of being happy with the way things are and feeling safe, not wanting; an inner peacefulness. When people practice meditation and “slowing down”, these are the feelings they report; not wanting or striving, but feeling calmer inside and connected to others. This is quite a different positive feeling from the hyped-up, excitement or “striving and succeeding” feeling of the drive-excitement system. It is also different from just low levels of threat, which can be associated with boredom or a kind of emptiness.

One of the functions of this system is to calm the threat system and to balance out the drive system. It can feel difficult to move into the soothing/support system with persistent physical pain, because there are so many threats. However, it is particularly important to be able to access the soothing system when we are faced with dealing with persistent pain or other physical health issues, because feeling soothed and calmed enables restoration of the body and mind.

What this means for managing pain

Throughout the day we are constantly moving between emotion systems. Starting to recognise this is an important step in being able to act more flexibly to situations, rather than reacting based on how we are feeling. Below are two examples of how we can move between emotions very rapidly when responding to different situations, and also how our emotions influence our actions.

I was about to go on a walk by the seafront, when I started to have anxious thoughts that my pain would get worse (threat), I then started to tell myself that I was useless because I can't even manage a short walk (self-criticism - threat), this made me feel frustrated and down (threat). However, I knew from the programme that it was important to get gentle exercise, and I had planned a route that was manageable for me. When I achieved this, I felt calmer and content (soothing system). Later that day, my pain had not flared up as I feared, I started to think how it had been quite an achievement to exercise and for my pain/fatigue levels to be manageable afterwards. I felt excited and a buzz of achievement (drive).

When the doctor suggested that there was no other medical intervention to treat my pain, my immediate reaction was to feel irritated, because I thought that she was suggesting that the pain wasn't real (threat). She then suggested attending the pain management programme to help me cope with my pain. This made me even angrier, because I felt that she was giving up on me (threat). She recognised that I was feeling frustrated and told me that she could see how difficult everything was for me, which made me feel cared for and understood (soothing). I realised that she wasn't suggesting that the pain isn't real, but rather that I can have some control over my pain and the way it affects me. I went away feeling motivated to make some positive changes to my life (drive).

Your notes

PALS

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