



Be Pain Smart – Pain

What is pain?

Pain is an important warning sign for the body, but when pain continues after the body is healed, or for an unknown reason, this is called **chronic pain**. This pain is real and there are many ways to help manage it.

For such a small word, pain, is very complicated and can mean different things to different people. Unfortunately, chronic pain is common after a brain injury. The pain could be left over from injuries from an accident or a fall, or it could be because the body is now moving in a different way. It could even be for unknown reasons. Even if you do not know the reason for your pain, your pain is real and there are lots of ways to help manage it better.

Types of pain

Pain is one of your most important body systems because it is a warning sign when there is something wrong or you have an injury to your body (pain = harm). This is called **acute pain** and it usually lasts for a short time while the body is healing.

Sometimes the pain system stops working properly and the pain continues after your body has stopped healing. This is called **chronic pain** and it can last for months and even years. When this happens, pain is no longer a warning sign of danger or that something is wrong in your body. This pain does not mean that there is more harm to your body (pain does not mean harm).

Remember, for **acute pain**

Pain = Harm to your body

For **chronic pain**

Pain ≠ Harm to your body

Now you know the difference between acute and chronic pain, there are also different types of chronic pain.



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There are three different types of chronic pain

TYPE OF PAIN	WHAT IT MEANS	EXAMPLES	HOW IT FEELS
Nociceptive	Pain after an injury to your body tissue.	Broken bones, acute appendicitis, sprains, bruises	Aching, throbbing
Neuropathic	Pain after an injury or damage to your nerves or part of your nervous system.	After shingles, amputation, or the effects of diabetes	Sharp, shooting, burning, electric shock
Nociplastic	This is pain even though there has not been any damage or injury to your body. This is a new type of pain and is likely caused when your body and brain become 'programmed' to feel pain over time.	It can be felt anywhere	All of the above

You might ask yourself, 'So why am I still in pain?' There are lots of different ideas about why this is the case. Some people think, 'I have pain, there must be something wrong in my body – maybe I should see another doctor or have another scan' or 'Maybe the doctors have missed something and I still have something wrong with me'. When you have had pain for a long time and you have been assessed by doctors, often it is not something in your body that can be fixed. Usually, it means you have chronic pain. To understand why this is the case, you first need to know a bit more about how the brain works.

Watch [this video](#) to find out more.

All the information your brain needs travels from your body to the brain. This includes simple things like the seat you are sitting on, and even what you had for breakfast. This information travels to your brain where it is controlled by gates or filters. These gates control the type and amount of information your brain gets at any one time. If this did not happen, your brain would be flooded with too much information and it would not know what to pay attention to.

Pain is an important system in your brain and body. When you have pain, a message or signal is sent through your body from the painful area to your brain. If a pain signal is very high, then the gates will open wide and the brain will let you know that you need to do something about it.

Pain is like a warning system in your body.

For acute pain from an injury, for example, these gates work very well. If you take a strong drug, you can close the gate and turn down the volume on the pain. But with chronic pain or pain that is ongoing, the gates are much harder to close and normal treatments do not seem to work as well.



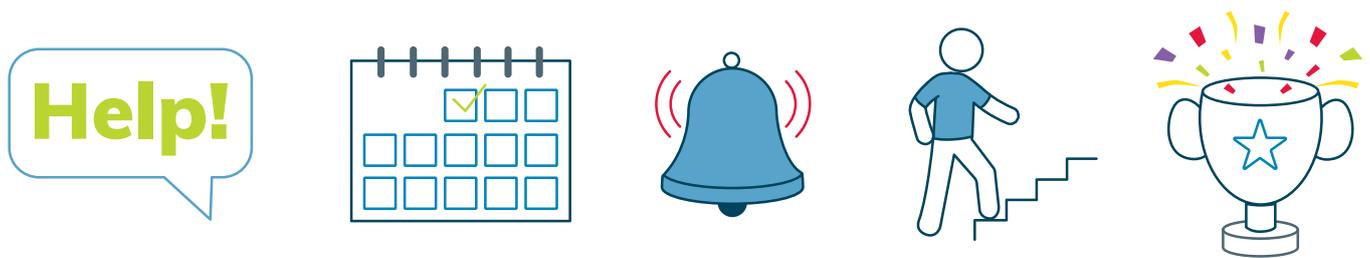
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The good news is, there are things you can do to close the gate and turn down the volume on your pain. When your thoughts and feelings change, your brain releases different chemicals. Some of these brain chemicals open the gate and others close the gate. For example, when you are tired, stressed, or anxious, the brain releases chemicals which open the gate and increase your pain.

But when you are calm and relaxed, your brain releases chemicals which closes the gate and reduce your pain. So, managing your thoughts and your feelings is key to helping you manage your pain. Things such as exercise, meditation, getting more sleep, and changing your diet, are all helpful tools to close the gates and manage pain.

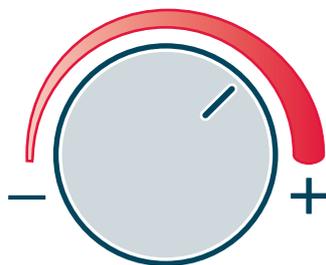
It usually takes more than one thing to do the trick, so check out all the tools, find out what works for you and make an action plan. Like learning any new skill, managing pain takes lots of practice, so give yourself some time and make the tools a regular part of your life.

When managing your pain remember to:



It can take a while to really understand what this all means, try watching the [video](#) a few times and talk to someone about what this means for you.

It can be helpful to know that while it is unlikely that your pain will go away, you can reduce its impact on your life over time. Unfortunately, there is not a switch to turn your pain off, but you can learn to turn down the volume of your pain. Learning ways to turn the volume down is the key to managing your pain.



The good news is...

You can train your brain to ‘Be Pain Smart’ and help manage your pain better.



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Your pain gates

One way to help you to turn down the volume on your pain over time is to figure out what things make the pain gates open or close. The things that open your gates are those that make pain worse and the things that close your pain gates are those that make your pain better.

See the example below

**WHAT ARE THE THINGS THAT OPEN YOUR PAIN GATES?
(MAKE YOUR PAIN WORSE)**

**WHAT ARE THE THINGS THAT CLOSE YOUR PAIN GATES?
(MAKE YOUR PAIN BETTER)**

Sitting for too long

Listening to my favourite music

Stressing about my finances

Going to the beach and watching the waves

Sunday morning after getting wasted on Saturday night

Working on my mindset to keep my mind focused on helpful thoughts

Catching up with my mates, if I stay for more than 2 hours

Catching up with my mates, if I stay for only 2 hours

Driving in traffic

Being mindful

Watching TV all day

Going for a short walk

Doing the shopping

Playing video games

Now it is your turn – have a go at writing down what opens and closes your gates.

[Download a blank pdf worksheet.](#)





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**WHAT ARE THE THINGS THAT OPEN
YOUR PAIN GATES?
(MAKE YOUR PAIN WORSE)**

**WHAT ARE THE THINGS THAT CLOSE
YOUR PAIN GATES?
(MAKE YOUR PAIN BETTER)**



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The brick wall of pain

Often when you have chronic pain, it can feel like your pain is holding you back from what you want to do and meeting your goals. But if you really focus on it, it is not just your pain that is getting in the way, there are a lot of other issues that are blocking you. Finding out what these are can be the first step in making a way to move past them. Otherwise your goals will keep coming unstuck.

These issues and problems can sometimes all come together, and it will seem like you have a big wall in front of you, blocking you from getting to where you want to be. This can be your hopes, dreams, goals, whatever it is you are wanting your life to be. Sometimes it can feel like you are constantly banging or pushing against this wall to get to your future. Sometimes the wall can look so big and overwhelming that it is impossible to reach or even see what your hopes or dreams look like.

Over time, the wall can become so big, that it can look like an **impenetrable fortress**, which can lead to feelings of depression, helplessness, and hopelessness. When you regularly feel like this, you might try less, making the wall look even bigger and harder to overcome.

But there is one key thing about the wall, it is a brick wall and is made up of different bricks; smaller parts that come together to create the wall. The only way to move past the wall is not to climb over it, dig underneath or go around it, but to get rid of the bricks one by one so you can get to the other side, changing your life. This can take a while and sometimes just making a window so you can see through, is be a big achievement.

The first step to breaking through your brick wall is to work out what the bricks are in your wall, that is, identify the problems and barriers in your life. Try filling in the empty bricks with issues that you commonly face – some will be clear and others not. You need to name the bricks first before you can make a plan to break through the brick wall.



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What are some of the general barriers in your life? Your first one is probably pain, so write that on at the top of the wall but what are some other obstacles?

PAIN					
Anger	Changes to my role	Expectations of self	Unhelpful thoughts	Boredom	
	Movement	Physical injuries	Cranky	Failed treatments	Grief
Memory	Motivation	↓ Energy	Depression	Lack of control	
	Side effects	Lack of identity	Finances	Medications	Fear
Poor diet	↓ Strength	Resentment	Fatigue	↓ Hope	
	↓ Fitness	Inconsistent	Sadness	Priorities	
Poor sleep	Expectations of others	Lack of activity	Isolation	Poor sleep	
	Role change	Withdrawal	Frustration	Relationship issues	
Stress	Less activity	Poor habits	Other life events	Anxiety	

Now have a go yourself – what are the bricks in your wall?



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Write the bricks in your wall below.

You can see, all these individual bricks have built up to become a large wall, one that is hard to see over. You can now understand why you need to use a lot of different tools to help you manage your pain.

Many of the bricks are connected – physical injuries can lead to less activity, unhelpful thoughts can lead to feelings of depression and anger. These links are like the glue or cement that hold the bricks together, strengthening the wall and making it more difficult to move past. To bring down the wall you need to work on each brick, one by one, and find out why it is a barrier, what that means for you. Breaking things down into smaller, more manageable chunks or bricks, makes things feel less overwhelming and more achievable.

Remember, this means that you cannot just rely on a single medication or a treatment to reduce your pain, you will need to work slowly on the bricks. Once you get rid of one brick and then another, then another, the whole structure and support of the wall starts to break down, making it easier to see and get to your future on the other side.





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Pain thought swaps

When you have pain, it is easy to have unhelpful thoughts that can make your pain worse. It helps to swap these for more helpful thoughts. Look at the examples below.

In the first column there are some common unhelpful thoughts you might have about your pain. These are thoughts that other people in chronic pain have said that they have – are these thoughts familiar to you?

Next to these are some more helpful thoughts – you can call these **thought swaps** – these are thoughts that you can swap for your unhelpful depressive thoughts. Read through the different thoughts below to see which ones work for you.

UNHELPFUL THOUGHT	THOUGHT SWAP
<i>My pain is worse, it will never go away.</i>	<i>I know I cannot make my pain go away entirely, but I can cope with this.</i>
<i>The pain is so bad, it feels like I will be stuck like this forever.</i>	<i>Even when my pain gets bad, I know it will not stay like this forever.</i>
<i>When the pain is so bad, it makes me feel so stressed and angry.</i>	<i>I will try to keep myself as calm as possible.</i>
<i>I do not want to do anything when I am in pain.</i>	<i>I do not feel like doing anything but if I do it anyway, I may feel better than if I do nothing.</i>
<i>The pain controls me, I am powerless.</i>	<i>There are many things I can do to help myself to manage the pain as best I can (exercise, pacing, relaxation).</i>
<i>I cannot accept the pain.</i>	<i>I do not want to accept it, but this is how it is. I accept that this is how it is for the time being, now I can try to get on with my life in a healthy way.</i>





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Now, it is your turn to create your own **thought swaps**. They work better when they are personal to you. Take a moment to think of one of your common thoughts about your pain. Write the thought below...

My unhelpful pain thought...

Now think of a new, more helpful thought to swap with the old one

My new, more helpful thought...



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Keep going with making more **thought swaps** about your pain.

Write your unhelpful thoughts in the first column and then make a new, more helpful thought to swap it with.

UNHELPFUL THOUGHT

THOUGHT SWAP

