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Pain – making it easier

Knowing your pain can enable you to better manage symptoms. We shed light on the complex subject of persistent pain...

We're all familiar with pain, but for some people it becomes an all pervading feature dominating their lives. This article takes an introductory look at some of the research and how your knitting and stitching can help you to better manage your pain.

Pain exists to protect us, to warn us of danger, prompting us to act quickly. For example, if you place your hand on a hot plate,

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the pain will cause you to remove your hand before further damage is done. Chronic or persistent pain, however, is different. This is pain that extends beyond the expected healing period (more than three to six months). It's complex, highly personal, serves no

protective function and leads to other health problems such as depression, stress and a lowering of your quality of life. It isn't always an extension of acute pain, or as a result of injury and can develop for no apparent reason. In persistent pain the danger alerting system goes wrong – it becomes more sensitive – and the resulting continuous pain sets up a series of vicious cycles.

Knitting and stitching are effective as pain management tools for a number of reasons. They are powerful portable distractors for immediate use, but they also deal with the complex cycles and interlinking issues that arise as a result of persistent pain. In addition, knitting and stitching groups are an excellent way of tackling the loneliness and isolation often experienced by whose lives are dominated by pain.

The brain and pain

A knowledge of what's currently known about pain, and how your emotions and

behaviour can interact with it, will enable you to learn to better manage it and develop effective coping strategies. Importantly it will help you to

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accept your pain to learn to live alongside it. 'Knowing' your pain can help to improve your quality of life.

Research has shown that your mind and attitude play a bigger part in how much pain you feel than the extent of the original injury or condition. This is not to say that persistent pain is imaginary, but rather that it is a lot more complex than was originally thought.

The pain you actually feel is very real, but your thoughts, beliefs and feelings alter your perception of it on a daily, even hourly basis and from situation to situation.

Past experiences and associations also play a part. The Pain Coalition in 2007 stated that 'Pain is what a person says it is.'

For over 400 years the medical world thought that pain originated in joints, muscles, bone, ligaments, tissues. MRI scans have helped researchers to study pain and its effects in the brain more clearly. It's now known that pain inducing signals travel to the brain, but have to be taken notice of and processed before you feel pain. So **pain is actually an output of your brain.** If the brain ignores these incoming signals in favour of others, you'll feel no pain.

Taking your mind off

Distraction is the most powerful analgesic we know of. Your brain needs to constantly prioritise signals to focus on the more important ones. Distraction is the process of creating other signals for it to concentrate on. These incoming signals 'distract' the brain's attention and the process really does demonstrate the power of your mind. You can find out more about distraction in Part Two.

Your brain also has the power to modify the signals coming from your body and it's here that a number of other influences can determine the degree of pain you experience.

Sensors throughout your body convey messages to

your spinal cord where they encounter 'gates'. These gates can be opened or closed to facilitate or block the transmission of signals on their way to the brain. If

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you knock your funny bone and rub it, you'll feel less pain. This is because the gentle rubbing sends messages along nerve fibres that carry the message to the spinal column faster than those carrying the messages about the knock. The rubbing closes the Pain Gate. In persistent pain the system itself becomes more sensitive. Nerves may be firing continuously, the Pain Gate fails to close completely, which means you'll feel pain all the time. The degree of closure modulates the signals reaching your brain in the first case.

The Gate can also be closed by messages sent down from the brain, which is how experiences, emotions, situations and stress can have a big impact on the actual pain you feel. Your brain looks at the personal and social context in which you experience pain. This may be influenced by past

experiences and even your childhood. Your brain will then choose to increase or to tune down the priority of these signals. In this way your attitude to your pain can have a significant impact on the pain you actually feel.

The brain and the spinal cord also produce their own natural pain relieving chemicals called endorphins. Endorphins are the body's natural morphine, so have powerful pain relieving qualities. Exercise, excitement and even distraction can stimulate their release.

Fear that if we continue normally we'll do more damage, fear that something may be seriously wrong, lack of sleep, stress, anxiety, lack of energy, low mood and depression can all increase the pain you feel. Pain can affect your immune system, concentration, memory, even your personality and identity. Simply being aware that ongoing pain doesn't mean you're doing more damage to your body goes a long way to alleviating the associated fear and worry.

Pain cycles

Stress, anxiety and depression play a big part in the pain we feel, too. The important issue is to recognise them and deal with them. Under stress the brain turns up the priority of the signals, muscles get tense and the nervous system becomes more active and sensitive. The

resulting muscle tension, loss of sleep and high levels of stress hormones not only result in an increase in pain, but other health problems and more stress.

Even without a history of injury, stress and depression can trigger pain cycles through muscle tension, loss

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of sleep and poor posture. So it's very important to manage stress and get help for any depression. Negative thoughts and feelings can lead to more pain, whilst a positive approach will help you deal with it. Treating the depression can improve your pain so don't just sit and hope it will go away.

Knitting and stitching are very effective for managing stress; they enable you to escape into the sanctuary of a quiet mind. Many knitters who meditate say the rhythmical repetitive hand movements and the gentle click of the needles enables them to enter a state of mind akin to meditation.

If you find dropping off to sleep difficult, knitting or stitching for about 20 minutes beforehand breaks into those destructive thought cycles. When pain

wakes you up at night pick up a bedside project to relax and distract you in the comfort and warmth of bed. It can be done quietly without waking the rest of the household!

It's important to schedule in some fun time for every day and go to sleep thinking about this; it will help you to look forward to tomorrow. It's all too easy when energy levels are low and feelings of guilt are high to place time for yourself and enjoyment at the bottom of your 'to do' list.

Pain can easily dominate every waking moment. The sufferer's world closes down, opportunities decrease, social contact diminishes and depression can often result as the pain sufferer sees no way out. As a result more pain is felt.

Knowing how

A knowledge of how pain works, a planned strategy of action to give structure to your day and your knitting and stitching can get you out of these vicious cycles. We know from the research already done by psychology researcher Jeni Brown of Cardiff University that knitters and stitchers reported a significant improvement in mood during and after stitching. We also know that an improved mood makes for a better tolerance of pain, so don't feel guilty about the time you spend on your hobby; it's an important part of your pain

management arsenal. However, follow our *Stitchlinks Good Posture Guide* and make sure you take regular breaks to stretch and walk around.

Stitchlinks is very successful in helping people maintain vital social contact. Making friends around the world opens up wider opportunities and adds interest, particularly if you're housebound. Isolation, with no outside interests or distractions, plays a big part in the downward spiral into increased pain.

Managing persistent pain is about adapting and finding new ways to live life alongside your pain. If you're unable to go out into the world, find ways of bringing the world into you. Computers and the internet are a wonderful way of doing this. A world of shopping, information and friends opens up with the

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click of a mouse. Talking to people who have experienced similar life changes can help enormously. Keep up with the latest research, learn new skills and hobbies to replace those you may no longer be able to enjoy.

Even do your weekly food shop and get those heavy bags delivered straight to your door.

A knitting and stitching project can help you deal with the 'Why me!' anger, frustrations and guilt of being ill and needing to rely on others. They can also provide you with structure and purpose to each day. Having goals to aim for and a sense of achievement when they are reached helps to break into those negative thought cycles. You discover you can succeed and do things well. All this helps to give you back control of life. Many people with long-term conditions feel out of control of their lives. They feel controlled by their illness, the drugs, doctors' appointments and other issues. Feeling in control, even if it's only in a small aspect of life, can significantly change your outlook on life.

Be calm

Knitting and Stitching also teach forgotten emotions such as excitement and anticipation and have a calming influence. They may even go deeper and these are some of the areas we'll be looking at in our research.

Portable projects can help deal with pain spasms when out and calm any panic or anxiety you may experience at the anticipation of pain. As a result they can support you in social circumstances which you might otherwise

find daunting, helping to tackle feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Lack of activity as you age, or activity avoidance due to fear of making an existing pain worse will increase pain. Inactivity causes joints to become stiff, muscles and ligaments to shorten and become weak, and can in itself cause pain

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without injury. Aerobic activity also stimulates the release of endorphins for that 'feelgood' factor and can work wonders in halting a downward spiral. Exercise also releases pent up feelings of frustration and anger, burns calories and will help you to relax and sleep. It's a good idea to take advice from a Chartered Physiotherapist on the best exercises to suit your particular needs before you start. You should always check with your GP, too.

It's important to pace your daily activities and your knitting and stitching will make pacing less frustrating, even enjoyable, by making those enforced breaks fly by.

Pain can be made worse by the system of health care itself. It can be demoralising and lead to low self esteem

and confidence, particularly if extensive tests fail to reveal a physical cause for your pain, which is often the case. At times like these it's even more vital to maintain control, structure and social contact, as you could find yourself drifting listlessly from day to day, dominated by your pain, hospital appointments, drugs and their side effects. It's important you realise that it's entirely your decision how you respond to it.

Your quality of life is made up of a number of factors; friends, your work, what you do in your spare time, your home and lots more, and it differs with each individual. Quality of life can be significantly decreased by persistent pain, but it's within your power to take measures to counteract this. Taking control is about knowing your limits and building strength and stamina within those limits. Maintain a good quality of life by increasing the fun tasks and social contact and cutting down on life's chores.

Stitchlinks support

We won't pretend any of this is easy. It isn't, but a supportive network of friends will make it easier.

Psychological approaches can't cure your pain, but they can help you to live well alongside it, and enable you to move on to lead a fuller life. Most importantly you need never feel you're alone.