

When you are in pain, it can often be a mental and emotional battle, as well as a physical one. There are a number of things that you can do to help to reduce the distress of living with pain, strategies such as learning to think as helpfully as possible and looking after how you feel about things can really help with your overall pain management. But why is this so? The way we think and the way we feel has a direct impact on our experience of pain. The experience of pain is processed in the brain. When pain messages reach the brain, they give information about where the pain is what type of pain it is and the intensity. Messages also travel to parts of the brain that deal with thoughts and feelings. Messages go from the brain down the spinal cord to generate an action in response to the pain - such as pulling your hand away from something hot. Messages are also sent in response to the thoughts and feelings caused by the pain and these messages influence how the pain messages are transmitted. Chemicals are released during this process, which can either help to reduce the experience of pain, or increase it.

It is helpful to think of your brain as your body's control centre where thoughts and feelings can either increase or decrease your experience of pain – just like a volume control.

You may notice that when you are very tired, stressed or when you are unwell, for example with a bladder infection, your neuropathic pain is often worse. Let's explore this volume control in more detail.

From the video on the website, in the *Understanding Pain after SCI* episode, recall the pain gates in the spinal cord and brain. If you are unwell, stressed, anxious or angry, messages travel down from the brain causing these **pain gates to open wide** so more pain messages get through and the experience of pain increases. You may notice that in some situations your pain is less of a problem. This can be when you are completely focused on something else, such as doing your favourite hobby, concentrating on a really good movie, listening to music, when you are exercising or during meditation or relaxation practice. These activities help stimulate the body's natural feel good chemicals, reducing the nervous system excitation and encouraging **the pain gates to close**. By learning these strategies, and practicing them often, you will be adding to your toolbox of helpful pain management skills to use to reduce the impact of pain on your life.



Figure 1: When pain gate is open, experience of pain increases

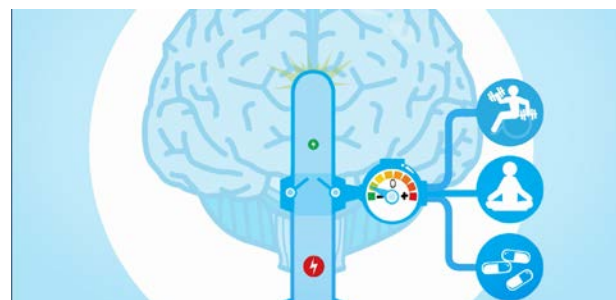


Figure 2: Pain gate closed, experience of pain reduced

With practice, you can train & develop these skills & strategies. This will help to control & better manage your pain.

*Start by taking note of how pain makes you think and feel...*

When my pain is bad, I think:

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When my pain is bad, I feel:

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## HELPFUL Vs UN-HELPFUL THOUGHTS

Unhelpful thoughts that either make you feel worried (such as ‘there must be something terribly wrong to cause this pain’) or undermine your confidence (for example ‘I cannot cope with this’) are common when people have chronic pain. Unhelpful thoughts can make your pain worse and can reduce your ability to cope with the pain. The good news is that thoughts can be changed however, and changing them can help to reduce your pain and increase your ability to cope with it.

There are two main ways of dealing with unhelpful thoughts. Firstly, you can try challenging these thoughts by taking time to analyze whether they are realistic or helpful, and then trying to come up with some different ways of looking at the situation. Secondly, you can adopt an accepting approach to the thoughts, allowing them to pass without engaging with them or allowing them to trigger a distressed emotional reaction.

What other people say may seem important, but what you say to yourself is even more important. This is called **self-talk**. Take a moment to check on your own self-talk – what is your “inner voice” telling you now? When you check in on your self-talk – remember to ask “Is it helpful to think like this?” and if the answer is no, try to think of a more helpful way of thinking about the situation.



The way you think about things is so important... Whenever I feel negative, I just put the headphones on and go for a push on the beach. It clears my head; smelling the ocean, relaxing – it’s like vacating your head for a while! It’s also about changing your perspective - it can be as easy as a scenery change. You are the same person after the injury and despite the pain – don’t let it change your identity.

Michelina, L2 paraplegia

## GOAL – SETTING

Successful achievement of goals is an important way to build self-confidence. Often complete pain relief is not possible, so it can be helpful to make a plan for how to achieve what is important to you *despite* the pain. Firstly, work out what is really important to you, for example returning to work or doing a favourite hobby. Then work out some achievable goals, break down your goals into smaller, bite size pieces that are achievable in a daily or weekly timeframe.

Remember, the best goals are **SMART GOALS**:

**S**pecific **M**easurable **A**chievable **R**elevant and **T**ime-limited

You have got to have a goal! My goal is “where is the next scuba dive?” I have that goal so I go to work every day! I work to dive! Being in the water makes us all equal – I have no pain when I dive.

Scuba M8, C7 quadriplegia





## DE-SENSITISATION

Pain is attention grabbing and our instinct is to direct our attention away and try to avoid it by distraction. Desensitisation is about making the pain less of a focus in your life by reducing its attention-grabbing effect. This involves intentionally focusing your attention on the pain for periods of time, without trying to change or escape from it, so that it becomes less distressing. This technique can take a bit of practice but can be particularly helpful for neuropathic pain types.

## RELAXATION & MEDITATION

Relaxation and meditation can assist in reducing muscle tension and stress that exacerbates pain. Many different strategies or techniques can be helpful. Regular, daily practice of relaxation can reduce underlying tension and help to close the pain gates in the spinal cord and brain. Relaxation or meditation can be used in response to daily stressors or pain flare ups, when it is important to remain as calm as possible, to stop the pain gates from opening more widely during these challenging times. Regular practice of relaxation strategies over different time periods (eg: 5 min relaxation bursts & longer 20 minute relaxation sessions) is a good way to develop strong and flexible skill in this area – skills that you can draw upon when the pain gets severe.



Everyone has a different way to cope with the pain. I used a lot of meditation early on and desensitisation. Now I have taught myself to play guitar, and when I play I don't feel the pain - it is like a meditation for me!

The most important thing is - don't give up! Try and talk about it – although that can be very difficult! I found it hard to open up and hard to trust early on. My girlfriend Susan helped a lot. Susan says “there are times when he would say “don't come over”....so I came over!”

Joe, incomplete paraplegia

## DISTRACTION

Many people with chronic pain describe a reduction in pain when they are busy or distracted by other things. Listening to music or audiobooks, being completely immersed in a favourite hobby or watching a great movie can be effective ways to take your mind off the pain.

If you focus on the pain - it's worse. So if you can do something to take your mind off it and really engage yourself, then it's much less painful. Then, the pain is really just background noise.

*Anne-Marie, incomplete T7 paraplegia*



## DEALING WITH PAIN FLARE UPS

The natural history of chronic pain means that however well you manage it, from time to time you are likely to have periods when your pain worsens. This is referred to as a **flare up**. It is important to distinguish a flare up from a new episode of pain which requires further investigation. Having a plan for how you will manage a flare up of your pain can be very helpful. You might write it down and share it with those who support you, such as your GP.

When you are having a flare up of pain it is really important to keep a check on your thoughts.

**TRY THIS:** Think about a situation when you have experienced an increase in pain. Write down what was going through your mind during this time then consider how this made you feel.



Situation:	
Pain Score /10:	
What I think:	
What I feel:	

During your pain flare up, were your thoughts along the lines of “This is awful” or “I can’t cope with this” or “I want to go to bed”. Can you gently challenge your thinking, to come up with a different response to the pain? This could be something like “It is OK – I have been through this type of pain before and I will be OK” or “I will pace my activity more so I don’t feel as tired”. Try to use a positive or helpful thought next time your pain flares and record how you feel.



Situation:	
Pain Score / 10:	
What I think:	
What I feel:	

You need to go over the top of the pain – to work around it almost. Know what makes things “breach the threshold” – things like poor sleep, hot temperature, stress. I make sure I talk about things. I make sure I laugh at least once per hour. Distraction is helpful. I use Facebook to distract myself when I’m in bed. It is important to have support from other people in the same situation – having support around you is just so important.

Caroline C2 incomplete quadriplegia



**TOP TIP!** For further information on Pain, Thoughts & Feelings check out these resources:

- <http://www.aci.health.nsw.gov.au/chronic-pain/spinal-cord-injury-pain/spinal-cord-injury-pain-thoughts-and-feelings>
- Read Chapter 11, 12, 13, 14 of *The Spinal Cord Injury Pain Book* by Siddall, McCabe & Murray (2014 HammondCare Media)
- Chapter 11, 12, 13 of *Manage Your Pain* by Nicholas, Molloy, Tonkin & Beeston (2000 ABC Books)