



**THE MATER**  
WELLBEING CENTRE

# COPING WITH CHRONIC PAIN

## Defining chronic pain

All of us will be familiar with the experience of pain, typically due to physical tissue damage or a bodily injury, such as a sprained ankle or a broken bone. Given the appropriate amount of time, the body will tend to heal itself in most cases. Sometimes, people develop a condition known as **chronic pain**, which can be a more complex issue to treat. Chronic pain, sometimes referred to as **persistent pain**, is a condition where pain tends to persist for more than six months, and long after the injury or disease that caused it, has healed or gone away. Some people develop chronic pain even when there has been no past injury or apparent body damage. It frequently affects or is affected by a person's psychological functioning and emotional state.

## How common is chronic pain?

Chronic Pain affects between 20-30% of the population. The American Academy of Pain Medicine reports that chronic pain affects more Americans than diabetes, heart disease and cancer combined. This echoes Irish research by Raftery et al (2011) in the School of Psychology, National University of Ireland Galway.

## Psychology and managing chronic pain

Best practice guidelines for managing chronic pain includes psychology alongside biomedical treatments, physiotherapy, and supported self-management. This is because research has shown that at least two main psychological issues affect the way a person copes with their condition. The first issue is how a person understands their condition and how they might deal with it. The second issue is a depressed mood, which can occur alongside other challenging emotions. People living with chronic pain may experience low mood, anxiety, anger and hopelessness. Irish research by the National University of Ireland, Galway suggests that those living with chronic pain are five times more likely to be depressed than those in the general population.

## Tips for Coping with Chronic Pain

**Stay active** This is one of the most important things you can do. Pain, and the fear of aggravating it, often causes people to stop doing things that were important to them. This tends to cause more problems. Try to remain as active as possible, within your limits.

**Acceptance** This is a very tricky point to get across because people often find it very difficult to accept their situation, which is understandable. Acceptance does not mean surrendering, giving up,

or resignation. Acceptance means trying to work with your situation, despite how difficult it can be at times. Acceptance is an on-going process, and our ability to accept things can also change. Sometimes it can help us psychologically, when we understand this more fully.

**Social Connections** Persistent pain can frequently get in the way of us remaining connected to other people. But research has shown social connectedness is possibly the most important thing for our mental wellbeing. It can make a good action plan.

**Stress Management** We know that pain intensity is the biggest problem reported by those living with chronic pain. This alone can cause stress. However, people typically have a number of different sources of stress. Stress tends to increase pain intensity, which makes it important to manage effectively. It's important to reduce stress in areas where this is possible. If you can, learn and practice relaxation techniques (such as meditation, mindfulness and/or effective breathing). Try to think more constructively (as opposed to positively), and exercise where possible.

**Exercise** This can be challenging when you're living with chronic pain, so it's important to do what's within your limits. Pacing is an important aspect of this and a general rule of thumb is push to your pain not through it. Another useful rule is to 'do less on days when you feel OK and more on days when you don't feel great'. Finally, exercise doesn't have to be rigorous. It can be gentle stretching, walking, swimming, yoga or something suited to a person's individual preferences.

**Coping Mentally** How we think often determines how we feel or even what we (don't) do. This is the basis of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). This is not to be confused with thinking positively, which can be helpful but it is also limited. Sometimes asking yourself, is what I'm thinking right now helping me? And if it's not, might there be a different way of thinking about the situation. Sometimes there will be, sometimes there won't. Could you distract yourself to take your mind off how you are feeling?

**Remain Hopeful** It is possible for someone living with a chronic pain condition to live a fulfilling and meaningful life. This isn't always easy, so it might be necessary for someone to take time to work out how to best achieve this. It's important to retain hope that your life can get better with better treatments, better self-management techniques and positive life developments.

**Reading** A very useful resource for helping people to manage their chronic pain effectively is a book called "Manage Your Pain: Practical and Positive Ways of Adapting to Chronic Pain" by Dr Michael Nicholas, Dr Allan Molloy, Lois Tonkin and Lee Beeston.



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