

## Emotional Impact of Living With Persistent Pain

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 to 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.



## 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

# 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 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 program to help me cope with my pain. This made me even angrier, because I felt that she was giving up on me (threat). She recognized that I was feeling frustrated and told me that she could understand how difficult it was for me, which made me feel cared for and understood (soothing). I realized 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).*

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