

## Where can I get further help?

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If you feel your pain is getting out of control, make an appointment to see your GP or take a look at the Trust's website to see what services we offer and their contact details. If you cannot get online please contact our customer services team on 0800 587 2108 for more details.

Website – [www.southwestyorkshire.nhs.uk](http://www.southwestyorkshire.nhs.uk)

Follow us on Twitter to get updates on what we're doing: [@allofusinmind](https://twitter.com/allofusmind)

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## Booklets available in this series:

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- Anger – How do I manage it?
- Baby Blues – How can I best deal with them?
- Bereavement – How can I cope?
- Confidence – How can I get some?
- Healthy living – What should I do?
- Healthy sex – How can I be sure?
- Low moods – How can I feel better?
- My body, my health. Check it out!
- Self harm – How can I help myself?
- Shyness – How can I manage it?
- Sleep – How can I get some?
- Stress – How do I manage it?
- The end of life – How can I prepare for it?
- Worries – How can I best deal with them?

### Your feedback is welcome

We invite you to share any comments, compliments, concerns or complaints you have about the Trust. Please speak to a member of staff or contact our customers services team on 0800 587 2108, who can also provide help in understanding this information, including in other formats.



Pain is something we all deal with at some point in our lives. This booklet aims to help you think about pain and how you can manage it.

If you experience pain on a regular basis, it's important to visit your GP who will help you come up with a plan to manage it. This booklet is to help you and if you require further help speak to a healthcare professional such as your GP.

## Step one: How to think about your pain

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Pain is an unpleasant feeling in our body that makes us want to stop and change our behaviour. We may think of pain as a complex and highly sophisticated protected mechanism.

So when you're in pain then your body has come to the conclusion (non-consciously) that you are in danger and in need of protection. There are numerous sources of information your body uses to work out what is going on in the world and whether you need protection. The obvious ones are the messages from the body. For example when you sprain your ankle, messages arrive in the brain that something potentially dangerous is happening in your ankle and a natural response is one of protection. This is when pain and behaviours that protect you begin (such as get help, limp, stress out, stop doing the activity).

Although even in this acute case, the messages from the body are only a part of the protection. Other factors include the context it happens in, your previous history of pain problems and cultural and social norms. So messages from your body work with other factors to form your experience.

When pain persists it becomes more complex. It's then you know that the painful body part is still injured. What's likely is that the brain thinks that a constant state of protection is required. The body becomes sensitive and protective cycles and behaviours that were initially helpful are no longer useful.

## What do you mean by sensitive body parts?

The body changes in sensitivity all the time. How did you last feel when you had the flu? Did everything hurt? That's a sign of the immune system changing the sensitivity in your body.

Another example is when you worked really hard in the gym. The next day your legs might feel horrendous. Again, nothing is damaged, but the immune system has changed the sensitivity in the legs to change your behaviours. This might mean you decide to have a rest day to recover. Our sensitivity to pain changes and is not constant.

“ I don't want to move. ”

### Things that change the sensitivity of the body to pain:

- Broken sleep - even one night of broken sleep changes how sensitive you are to pain.
- Lack of fitness – deconditioned and unexercised bodies are more sensitive to pain.
- A poor diet – poor diet choices change the inflammatory profile in your body, and, therefore, your sensitivity to pain. For example, a diet in highly refined processed foods should be avoided. A good diet should be made up of whole food that the body can cope with. For further advice please consult appropriate professionals.
- Trauma or abuse (especially in childhood) – trauma seems to set the immune/protection system on hyper-alert. This means it's not uncommon for it to over react and alert the body. Childhood trauma can lead to pain problems in adult life and you should seek appropriate help if needed.
- Stress – bursts of stress, such as exercise, are good but uncontrollable and persistent stress is not good for us and changes our sensitivity to pain.

- Burnout at work is a form of stress.
- Obesity – body fat secretes hormones that actually turn up the inflammatory response, so excess body fat can be a problem.
- Social isolation – being lonely is very stressful for a human and promotes a constant stress response. This can alert us to pain.
- Depression – associated with ongoing pain and changes the inflammatory profile in the body.
- Viruses – some infections and viruses can cause sensitivity changes.
- Even persistent use of some medications – persistent use of some pain medications can actually cause sensitivity changes. This is best to discuss with your doctor if you think it's affecting you.

It's likely that the common thread in all of the above is linked to the immune system and inflammation. Often many of the things above co-exist in complex webs. Too much or too little stress or inflammation in our immune system can be a problem so it's important to get the balance just right.

“ “ *It's taking over my life* ” ”

## What do you mean by protective cycles and behaviours?

As pain is ultimately there to protect us, it drives behaviours that help achieve this. This can vary from different individuals, but common protection strategies could be:

- Changes in the way we move - muscles tighten and restrict movement which means we feel stiff. This can have short term benefit, but if the behaviour persists, it can be a problem. Those with pain often feel vulnerable and move cautiously, but this cautious way of moving can be stressful to your body.

- Changes in emotion - gives us fear about certain activities and make us avoid things that have hurt us in the past. For example if you put your hand in the fire you know it's dangerous so you don't do it again. But often we see avoidance linked to tasks that are actually beneficial to the body, such as bending, lifting, squatting and exercise.
- Stress - pain itself is stressful. It's there to heighten our senses to danger in our environment. So long term pain is a long term stress. Ways to give patients some control of their pain can significantly reduce stress, which can then allow activities that promote health.

All of these behaviours are useful in the short term, but if they persist, they can actually become the mechanism that drives the pain.

It's also possible that these protective cycles can be fuelled by well-meaning friends, family and even health care practitioners. For example if someone told you your back was "out of place" then this may make you cautious to use certain equipment.

Spirals into persistent pain can be very individual, but they commonly involve some of the mechanisms described above. Therefore, treatment needs to begin to unravel these.

“ “ *It hurts!* ” ”

## Step two: Start managing

It's worth getting a skilled healthcare practitioner to evaluate you to ensure that there is nothing medical that needs addressing. But once pain persists for many months, and medical causes are ruled out, pain can be separated into two categories: pain that is localised in a specific body part or pain that is widespread over lots of areas and body parts.

## Pain in a specific body part

If the pain has been there for a number of months, longer than normal tissues healing times, then it's best to view the problem as a state of over protection. This depends on the individual but often we see people who protect the body part past it being a useful strategy. This protection can look quite different but the two most common protection strategies are the following: bracing and guarding the body part with a muscle brace so the part feels stiff and awkward and avoidance strategies (people stop doing tasks that have hurt them in the past, or if they do them, they tense their muscles even harder for protection.)

It's also possible that some of the above sensitising factors are also a problem – for instance, a flare of back pain coincides with a stressful life event and poor sleep. Treatment should be aimed at reducing the sensitivity, relaxing the body part and then getting it fitter with graded use and exercise. Often this is best done under the guidance of a healthcare professional.

Widespread body pain: This is best to be seen as a hyper protection and sensitivity problem, and a good place to start would be to address the potential factors that could be bothering you, maybe in the list above. So it may be best to look at life events, stress, sleep, diet and general exercise. Remember it's unlikely that any two people are the same and getting skilled help in your journey is important.

## Some useful strategies/ideas that you can get further guidance on

### Write

Therapeutic journaling can be a useful strategy. Keeping thoughts and emotions to yourself can be stressful so keep a journal to reduce stress and express your feelings.

““ *There's no way I can go out feeling like this.* ””

## Social support

We're human, we do well in communities and feeling connected to others relieves stress. Social isolation can be a real problem, especially in those with pain who "don't want to be a burden". Make sure you look to your friends and family for support or try to form a community in your local area.

Why not join a local support group? Not only will this help you socialise but will also introduce you to other people who are going through a similar situation. Visit your local GP practice or go online to [www.southwestyorkshire.nhs.uk](http://www.southwestyorkshire.nhs.uk) and see what groups are in your area. If it seems daunting to go on your own then ask someone to go with you.

## Relax

What relaxes one person may not relax the next. Try a few things but relaxation is vital to those in pain. People in pain spend too much time in a state of stress and less time in a state of relaxation. Finding balance between the stress system and the relax system is important. These could include the following:

- Meditation
- Aromatherapy
- Hypnotherapy
- Visualisation
- Reiki
- Acupuncture
- Walking in nature
- Having a passion/hobby and a sense of purpose

Please talk to your doctor first to make sure it will not affect any medication or treatment you are currently undertaking. Please note that many of these therapies will cost and you need to check the reputation of the therapist before you undertake any treatment.

## Sleep well

Sleep is underrated and undervalued in our constant highly active society. These days we are bombarded with stimulation from phones, social media, emails, food, internet, friends and family, work and more and much of this comes at the expense of sleep. Sleep research has changed dramatically in the last few years and its importance is now fully appreciated. Good quality rest has a great benefit on the relax system and is a potent pain killer. It's not always as easy as just saying "sleep better" as it can take some time to work it out. There is information out there that you may want to look at. A good place to start is "Sleep - How do I get some?" booklet by visiting [www.swyt.co/selfhelpguides](http://www.swyt.co/selfhelpguides)

## Step three: Let's start a conversation

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If you feel your pain is getting out of control then talk to someone who can help like a GP. They will talk to you and help you decide how you can move forward and if you feel it's appropriate they will come up with a pain management plan with you.

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