Understanding persistent pain

Why pain can carry on after the body has healed, and what that means for living with it.

Pain that lasts longer than three months is called persistent or chronic pain. It is real, whatever scans do or do not show. It also works differently from short-term pain, and understanding the difference opens up new ways to manage it.

Pain is a protector, not a damage meter

Pain is produced by the nervous system when it judges that the body needs protecting. With a new injury, that judgement is usually right. With persistent pain, the alarm system itself has become over-sensitive. It keeps sounding even after tissues have healed, or far more loudly than the state of the tissues warrants.

This is why hurt does not always mean harm.

What turns the volume up and down

Turns pain up

- Stress, worry and low mood
- Poor sleep
- Fear of movement
- Doing far too much, or far too little
- Focusing on the pain
- Feeling alone with it

Turns pain down

- Feeling safe and calm
- Good sleep
- Gentle, regular movement
- Pacing activity
- Absorbing, enjoyable things
- Support and understanding

None of this means the pain is "in your head". It means the brain and nerves are part of every pain, and they can be influenced.

What helps

1. Understanding pain, as you are doing now.
2. Gradually building activity, without boom and bust.
3. Better sleep and less stress.
4. Addressing fear and unhelpful beliefs about pain.
5. Getting back to what matters to you, with the pain if need be.

The aim

To get back to living well now and let the pain system calm down over time, without waiting for the pain to go first. Many people find that pain eases as they do more.

Always have new, changed or worrying symptoms checked by your GP.

Draws on the pain education work of Lorimer Moseley and David Butler.

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