

## CHRONIC PAIN:

Chronic Pain refers to pain that has been present for longer than 3 months and can be more difficult to treat than acute (or recent) pain. The table shows the differences between acute and chronic pain.

<b>ACUTE PAIN:</b>	<b>CHRONIC PAIN:</b>
Short term (less than 3 months)	Long term (longer than 3 months)
Warning signal that tells us something is wrong with our body, such as an injury	Not a warning signal that something is wrong with our body
Relieved by healing processes and treatment	Not always relieved by healing processes and treatment

### Why do people get chronic pain?

#### **Changes to the brain**

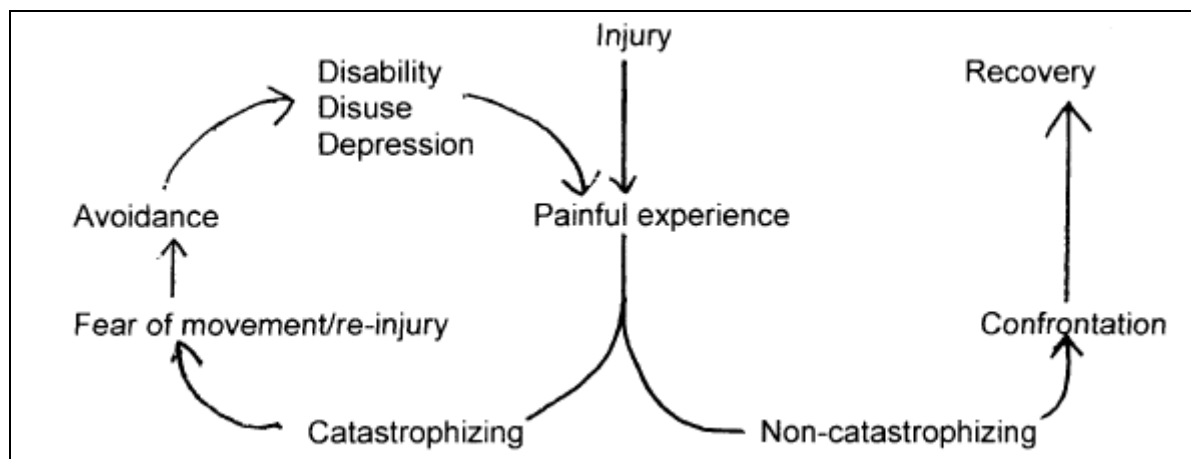
Research has shown that the structure of the brain changes slightly in some people who have had pain for a long time. These structural changes mean that these people are more likely to experience pain. Some recent research has shown that increasing your activity level slightly, despite having pain, might help reverse some of the structural changes that occur in the brain. It is not clear at the moment whether the structural changes that occur can be completely reversed.

#### **Changes to the nerves**

It has been shown that the nerves can become more sensitive in people who have longstanding pain. This means that pain can occur following fairly simple movements that would not normally result in pain. It is a bit like an 'overly' sensitive car alarm that can be set off by the wind rocking the car slightly.

#### **Deconditioning**

When people experience pain they often reduce their activity level. Sometimes this happens because of the pain itself and sometimes it can happen because a person is frightened that normal activity might lead to them damaging their back. When a person reduces their activity, their muscles and ligaments get stiff and weak, and their overall level of fitness goes down. All of these things actually increase the pain that a person gets in the longer term and makes it harder to do normal activities. This often leads to feelings of depression, frustration, anger, worry, loss of confidence etc which in turn can make pain worse and lead to a further reduction in activity. When all of this happens in a cycle of chronic pain can occur and it is very important to try and break this cycle.





The best way to break this cycle of chronic pain is to gradually increase your activity level. This helps reduce stiffness, increase strength and improve general level of fitness. It is important to remember that a little bit of soreness and stiffness is normal when you first try to break the cycle of chronic pain. This is because you will be using your muscles and ligaments in a way that they are not used to. A little bit of soreness is actually a good sign and means that your muscles and ligaments are being made to work a little bit harder. When muscles and ligaments are made to work harder they get stronger!

**REMEMBER, JUST BECAUSE SOMETHING HURTS YOUR BACK DOESN'T MEAN THAT IT IS CAUSING DAMAGE! THE AMOUNT OF PAIN DOES NOT EQUAL THE AMOUNT OF DAMAGE!**

**Getting your 'gates to close'**

The spinal cord contains 'gates' which allow the nerves to carry their messages to the brain. These gates can be used to help block pain messages from reaching the brain. When the gates are open more pain messages reach the brain. When the gates are closed less pain messages reach the brain. Although you cannot completely close the gates, you can close the gates slightly, which can help reduce your pain. Getting your body to release endorphins is an excellent way of getting your gates to close slightly. Exercising and doing things you enjoy is also an excellent way of getting your body to release endorphins.

Information taken from the SASP pre-congress course on chronic pain presented by Dr Steve Woby.

See the website of the OMPTG for your nearest OMPTG physiotherapist  
[www.omptg.co.za](http://www.omptg.co.za) or email [omgsa@icon.co.za](mailto:omgsa@icon.co.za) for further information

