

# The Path In (and Out) of CHRONIC PAIN



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## Challenging Childhood Experiences

During childhood, the nervous system learns to detect danger. With each experience that feels physically or emotionally unsafe, the brain learns to go into protective mode more quickly and its "alarm system" may become increasingly sensitive.

## Coping Strategies

When faced with challenges, children often try to reduce conflict by behaving perfectly. This can lead them to become perfectionists and people-pleasers in adulthood. The cost that comes with that is a learned, ongoing state of tension and vigilance in the nervous system.



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## Everyday Adult Stress

When an overprotective nervous system meets the everyday stress of adulthood, it often responds by producing physical symptoms. This may show up in the form of headaches, stomach issues, muscle tension, back aches, rapid heart rate, and many more.

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## Health Experiences

Health scares during childhood can have a huge impact on how protective the nervous system becomes. Major surgeries, injuries, or incorrect diagnoses can lead to pain catastrophizing, increased amygdala activity, and a more intense experience of pain.

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## Major Life Events

Just as everyday stresses trigger physical symptoms, major life changes can often coincide with the development of new or worsened symptoms. Common events include:

- Change in relationship status
- Change in housing
- Death or loss of a loved one
- Change in employment or career
- Ongoing discrimination
- Change in financial standing
- Involvement in an abusive relationship
- Traumatic event

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## Chronic Symptoms

At any point, an overactive nervous system can hit its tipping point and begin the cycle of chronic symptoms. These symptoms may begin with injury, underlying pathology, or appear out of the blue. Common examples include:

- Migraines
- Fibromyalgia
- Fatigue
- Back pain
- Neck or shoulder pain
- Hand or wrist pain
- CRPS
- Knee pain
- Leg or foot pain
- Trigeminal Neuralgia
- IBS and other GI issues
- Lingering pain from an injury
- Other symptoms lasting >3 months

## Learned Neural Pathways

The nervous system is exceptionally plastic, which means it can pick up habits easily. Pain is one of those habits. The more the nervous system "practices" activating a certain symptom, the easier it becomes to activate it again and again.

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## The Downward Spiral

Unfairly, the brain changes and life changes that come along with chronic pain provide the pain with fuel. Activities that naturally relieve pain and release “happy chemicals” become restricted, while fear and vigilance grow.

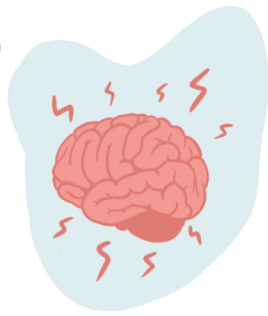
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## Brain Changes

As pain becomes chronic, many people experience a sensitivity adjustment. The brain becomes more and more protective, detecting danger and triggering a pain response even when no danger is present.

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## Pain Related Stress and Changes

Chronic pain doesn't just impact the brain, it impacts every aspect of life, including:

- Physical activity levels
- Social life
- Relationships
- Identity
- Mental health
- Daily routine

## Targeted Rewiring

The process of rewiring the neural pathways of chronic pain requires experimentation, patience, and consistency. Science-backed techniques, like those found in the Curable app, can greatly assist in this process. Common techniques include:

- Pain Science Education
- Guided Meditation
- Guided Visualization
- Graded Motor Imagery
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
- Expressive Writing
- Brain-Centric PT
- Social/Peer Support
- And many more

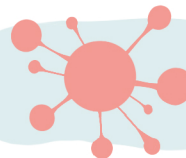
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## Knowledge

The brain processes chronic pain using its fear system. **In order to reverse the cycle of pain, the rational part of the brain (the prefrontal cortex) often needs to get more involved.** Simply learning about how pain works can help the prefrontal cortex play a larger role.



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## Self Discovery

To help the nervous system feel safe again, it is critical to understand what made it feel unsafe. This can be completed through guided writing exercises or with the help of a professional. **An understanding of the nervous system's journey into pain will provide a clearer map of the way out.**

## New Neural Pathways

Armed with a new perspective on pain, it is possible to start teaching an old nervous system new tricks. **Joy, play, gratitude, and physical activity are powerful habits that release natural pain-relieving chemicals.** The more these new habits are practiced, the more comfortable they will feel in the nervous system.

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## A Fresh Perspective

Following these steps can greatly reduce physical symptoms, but that is not the only benefit. The work it takes to unlearn chronic pain impacts every aspect of life, allowing for a deeper understanding of the self, better relationships, a greater enjoyment of everyday life, and a loving relationship with the body.



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