

# **Chronic Pain**

**What is it and what can I do about it?**

The aim of this booklet is to answer common questions about chronic pain and provide tools to start you on the road to managing your pain.

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## **The key to managing pain is to:**

- ✓ understand how pain works
- ✓ understand how pain affects you and your life
- ✓ learn skills to help you cope with your pain

Studies tell us that the more you understand your pain,  
the better you can manage it.

## What is pain?

- ✓ Pain is a signal from the brain
- ✓ It is part of our body's protective alarm system
- ✓ Pain is very complex

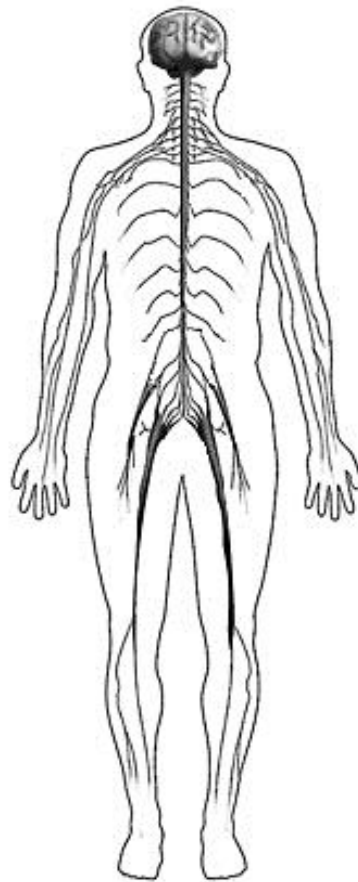
The alarm system tells you when there is damage to your body or when something dangerous is happening to your body.

For example, it tells you:

- To take your finger off a burning hot surface
- If you are under emotional stress

The alarm system is part of the body's nervous system. It is made up of nerves, the spinal cord and the brain.

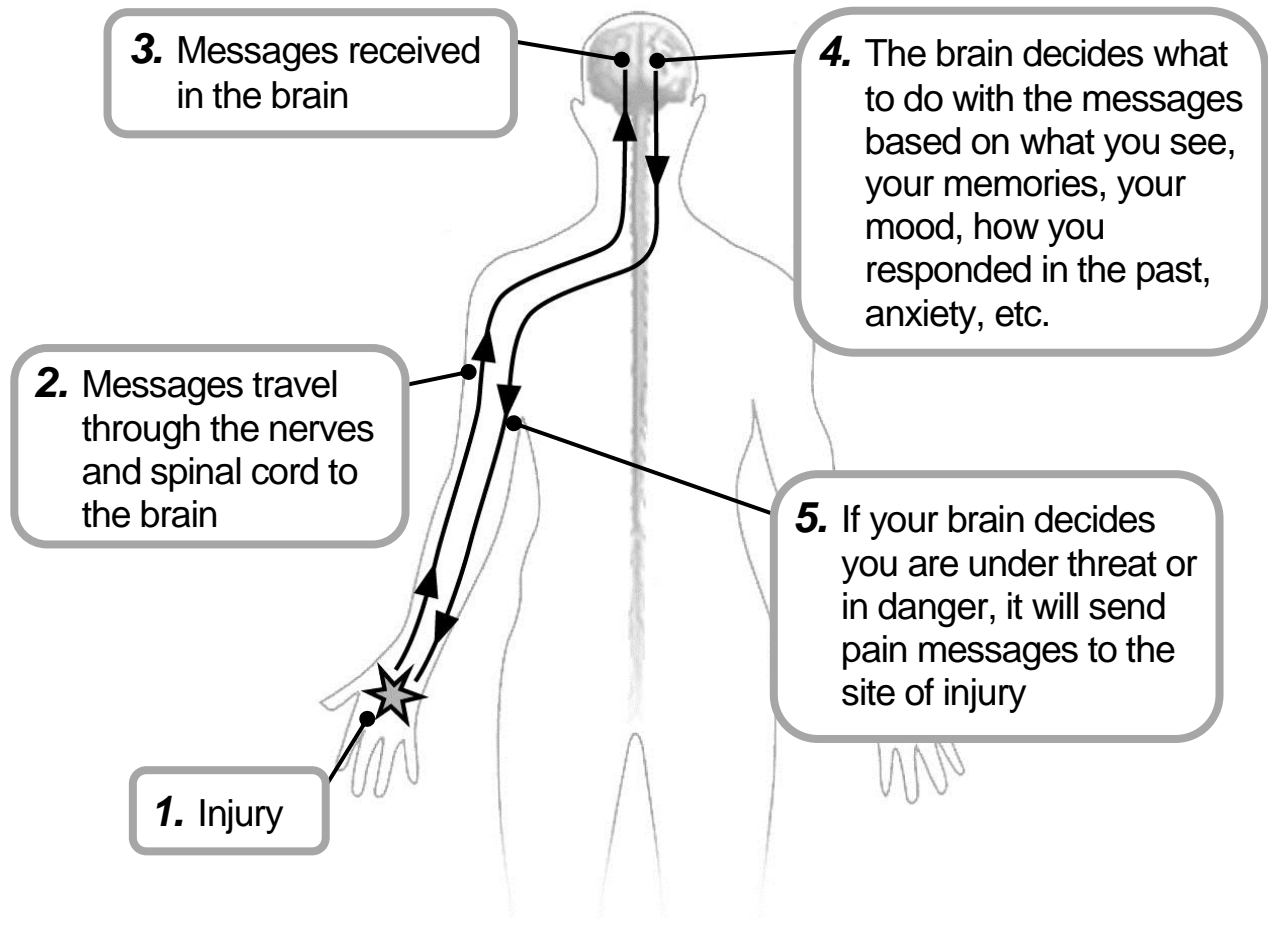
Although pain is unpleasant, we feel it for a reason



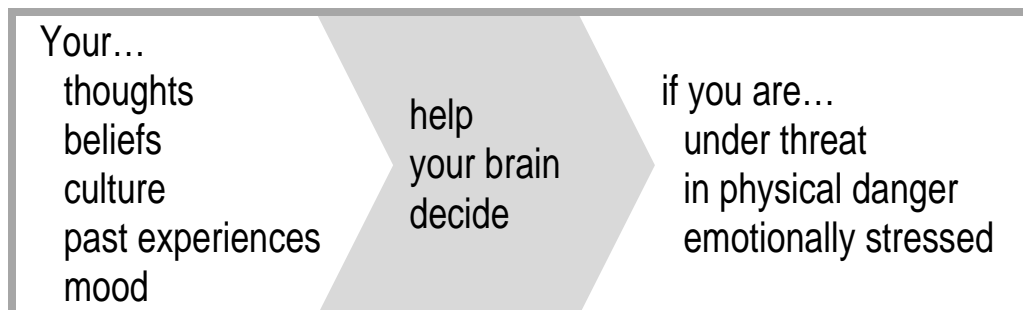
The nervous system is made up of nerves, the spinal cord and the brain

## How does the body's alarm system work?

The nerves in the nervous system carry messages from the affected area in the body to the spinal cord and to the brain.



Many things help the brain decide what to do with the danger messages.



## **What is Chronic Pain?**

Chronic pain, sometimes called 'persistent pain', is pain that doesn't go away even if you have had treatment for the condition or for the pain.

Sometimes chronic pain is part of another condition like arthritis, fibromyalgia, or complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS). Sometimes you feel pain and there is no clear cause as with some migraine headaches.

Chronic pain can be constant or can come and go. It can be sharp, dull or achy. Whatever you feel, it is real and unique to you. Men and women of all ages can have chronic pain. Even children can have chronic pain.

Chronic pain is most often caused by a nervous system that has become 'over sensitive' or 'wound up'.

## **What is an 'over sensitive' or 'wound up' nervous system?**

It is a nervous system that is constantly on high alert. It has become very good at receiving danger messages and sending out pain messages.

At times, even light touch, some noises and normal movements may cause pain. Have you ever noticed that a gentle bump on a coffee table, the noise of a door slamming or a gentle stretch may cause pain? These are all examples of an 'over sensitive' nervous system.

## What happens when the nervous system becomes over sensitive or wound up?

A number of things might change:

- ✓ How you think (thoughts)
- ✓ How you feel (emotions)
- ✓ How you do things (lifestyle)
- ✓ How you move your body (physical fitness)

Will this pain  
last forever?

I have no energy.

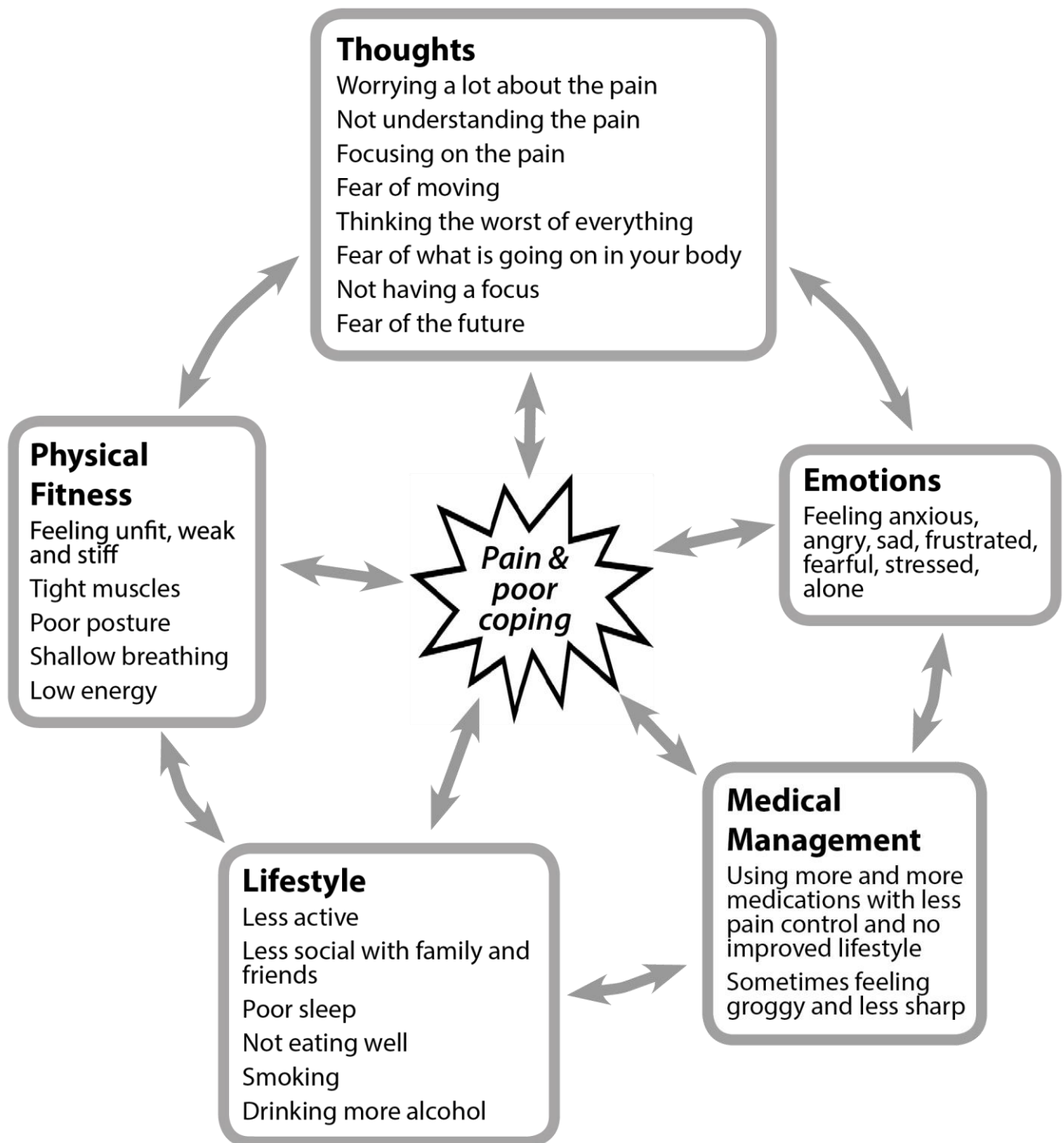
I feel hopeless.

How can I  
get help?



These changes may cause a cycle of pain leading to a wound up or sensitive nervous system. This can affect your physical and emotional well-being. The diagram on the following page shows how different things can create 'The Pain Cycle'.

# The Pain Cycle





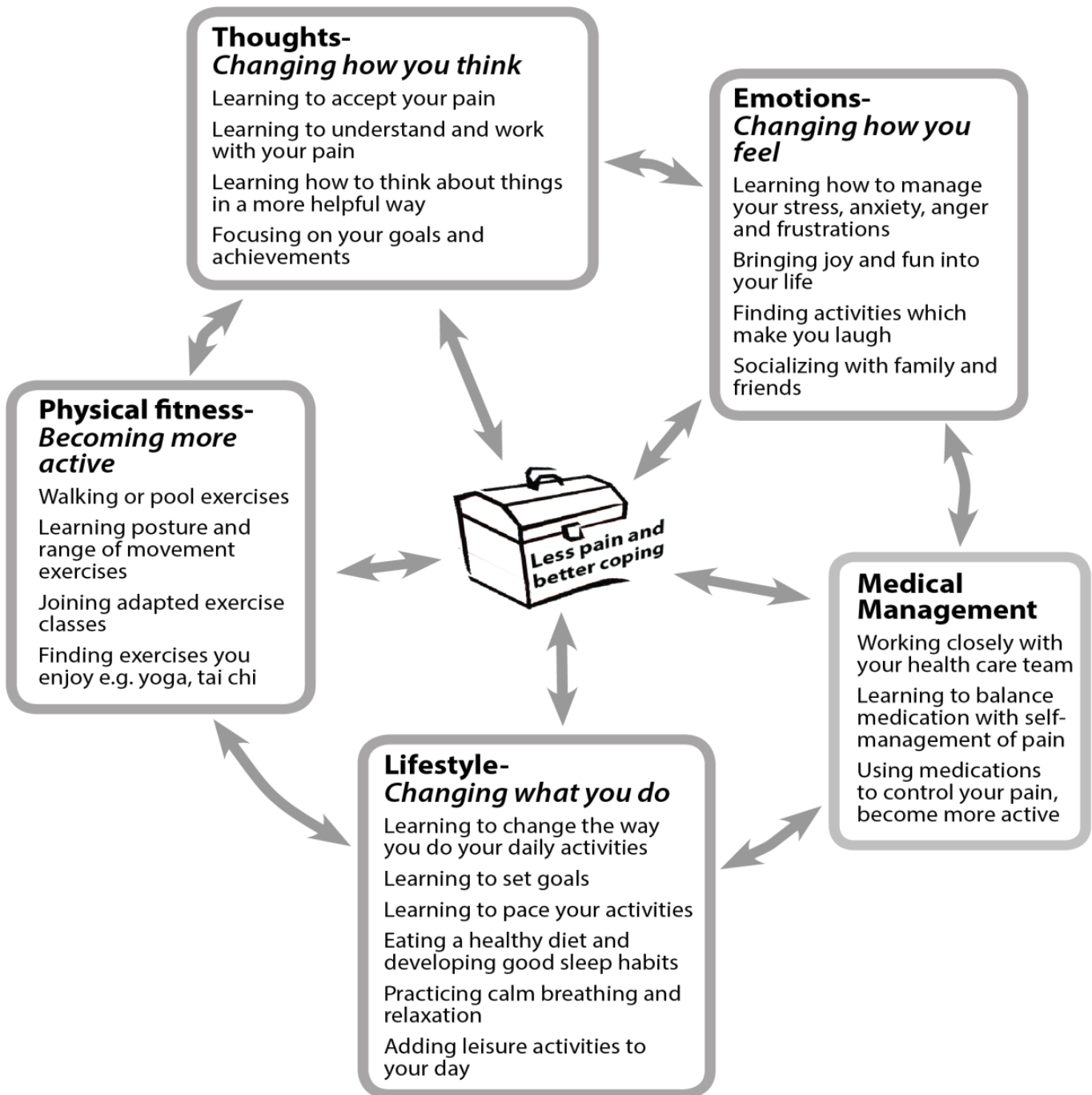
## **How is chronic pain managed?**

While there is no quick fix, the good news is that there are many ways you can wind down a sensitive nervous system and break the pain cycle. You can improve your physical and emotional wellbeing.

## **What can I do to break the Pain Cycle?**

Managing your pain is all about making changes. Changing how you think and feel about your pain, changing your lifestyle and improving your physical fitness.

## Tools you can use to break the pain cycle



## **Common questions about pain**

### **Should I ‘push through’ the pain?**

No, it is better to pace yourself in your activities. When you force yourself your nervous system will wind up and cause you more pain.

### **Should I give up doing daily living activities like housework and shopping?**

No, but you might need to learn new ways to do them. Use tools like good body positioning, pacing, and reorganizing your environment can help. An Occupational Therapist can help you with this.

### **How should I start to exercise?**

Start gently

Progress slowly

Do a little frequently

Don't overdo it

Don't do more on a 'good day'

A Physiotherapist can help you plan a safe exercise program.

### **What exercises should I do?**

Walking, adapted pool exercises or restorative yoga classes are ways to get you moving. It is important that you enjoy what you do and it is also important that your instructor is familiar with chronic pain.

## **Why is my brain so foggy? I can't remember anything. Am I going crazy?**

No, you are not going crazy! Pain is distracting and many factors can affect your thinking such as:

- Not getting enough sleep
- Feeling depressed
- Side effects of medicine

Pain makes it hard to focus on things, hard to learn and remember, and make decisions. People often say they do not feel as “sharp” as they were before. Calm breathing, moderate exercise, good sleep, and reducing clutter can help.

## **Why does my pain change from day to day?**

Many things will affect your pain:

- Your mood
- How well you sleep
- How busy you are
- Your relations with other people
- Even the weather

## **Why do I feel so irritable and depressed?**

Forced life style changes can make a person feel irritable or depressed. For example: loss of work, earnings, friendships, independence, fun activities and the way you used to do things.

## **Why can't I sleep?**

Pain can keep you awake or wake you up during the night. You might find that stress and worry can make it hard to switch your mind off at night.

## **What can I do to get a better sleep?**

- A mattress and pillow that give you good support.
- Be as physically active as possible during the day.
- Avoid caffeine in the evening.
- Avoid naps lasting more than ½ hour.

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**I have joy in my life.**

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**I am more active.**

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**I am getting  
back to work.**

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**I feel hopeful  
for the future.**

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Learning the tools of self-management will help you to accept the pain, make a commitment to change and lessen the impact your chronic pain has on your life.

# **My Notes**



## My Notes

[www.fraserhealth.ca](http://www.fraserhealth.ca)

This information does not replace the advice given to you by your healthcare provider.

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