



Being an active partner in your care

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PART 2: UNDERSTANDING YOUR PAIN CAN HELP TO EASE YOUR PAIN

Understanding how your pain works is the first step in working out a treatment plan tailored for you. A number of health professionals can help you understand and treat persistent or chronic pain.

If you are living with persistent pain, you might have already tried quite a few things. Understanding your pain and having a treatment plan are likely to be the most useful ways to reduce your pain and improve day-to-day life. Finding a supportive healthcare team, and being involved in choosing your own plan of action, will help.

This is Part 2 of the series. Part 1 introduced how pain works, and the health professionals that can help. Part 2 helps you identify the things that impact on your pain on a day-to-day basis and how you might be able to change them.

For additional copies of these brochures visit www.veteransmates.net.au

Your pain is personal and unique to you

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We now know that pain is not as simple as it might seem. Pain is a complex protective mechanism that is always decided upon by the brain. As highlighted in Part 1, pain can exist with or without damage to the body. Because of this, many things can contribute to your experience of pain, including your general mood, your beliefs about what is causing your pain, social interactions with others and past experiences.

Working out what might trigger, increase or reduce your pain, can help guide strategies to treat your pain. You will have pain when there is a greater sense of threat to your body tissues than there is sense of safety to your body tissues, and your brain decides that you need to be protected. This will be different for every person.

Sense of threat and safety can come from many, often surprising things. Signals from injured tissues can be a sense of threat, but the things we see, say and hear can also provide a sense of threat. At a certain point when there is enough sense of threat in your life, your brain will produce pain to look after you. Finding things that reduce threat and add safety will help reduce your pain. On the next few pages, Doug a veteran with chronic pain discusses what contributes to his pain, and the strategies that have helped him.

Doug Adams, aged 52, spent 20 years in the ADF. He returned from deployment to his wife and two teenage children three years ago. Doug has been living with persistent back pain for the last two years.

1. Based on the principles of *The Explain Pain Handbook: Proctometer* and adapted with permission from Noigroup Publications – www.noigroup.com

Doug talks about some of the things that increase his **sense of threat**:¹

All of these things can increase Doug's pain, especially when multiple things are combined.

Things I hear, see, smell, taste, touch

- My two teenage children fighting loudly
- Having an MRI scan of my back

Things I do

- Watching television all night as I can't sleep
- Not leaving the house except to go to work

Things I say

- My pain is unbearable
- I have a bulging disc

Things happening in my body

- Tension in my shoulders
- Feeling anxious
- Too much caffeine

Places I go

- Specialist appointments
- Hospital visit for a scan

People in my life

- My work mates think I should toughen up
- My father doesn't understand my pain

Things I think and believe

- The pain is only getting worse
- Exercise could make my back worse
- It is not safe to move

After seeing a physiotherapist who teaches me some exercises for my back, exercise becomes something that reduces my pain

Doug talks about some of the things that increase his **sense of safety**:

All of these things can reduce Doug's pain.
The aim is to have more on this side.

My Pain

PAIN GOES UP AS THE SENSE OF THREAT INCREASES

Things I hear, see, smell, taste, touch

- My GP explaining to me my scan is all clear
- My children laughing and playing footy

Things I do

- Going for a walk with the dog
- Learning about my pain

Things I say

- I understand my pain better
- I am going to get myself back to the things I enjoy

Things happening in my body

- Relaxed muscles
- Feeling optimistic
- Healthy diet
- Getting a good night's sleep

Places I go

- On a holiday
- Playing golf with my best friend

People in my life

- My wife, friends and family who understand me
- A supportive GP

Things I think and believe

- I have a health team supporting me
- Exercise will not damage my body and will help me move more easily

PAIN GOES DOWN AS THE SENSE OF SAFETY INCREASES

My Pain

How this information can help you

Identifying the things that increase your sense of threat and safety will help guide the best pain treatment strategies for you. This information can point to things you could change in your day-to-day life. For example if going for a walk with a friend, in your favourite place, helps decrease your pain, try to do this more often.

Complete the attached insert to identify the things that are associated with safety for you. The goal is to add more things that increase safety and reduce threat. If you can change the balance of threat and safety in your life, you can treat and reduce your pain.

Bring the attached insert to your appointments with your healthcare team. They can help you work through filling this

out. As outlined in Part 1, your healthcare team could include your GP, psychologist or physiotherapist. This information helps them to understand your unique pain and how to help you tailor strategies to improve your day-to-day life. They could also help you identify additional things that might affect your pain as these can hide in hard to find places.

Tip: Write these down on a sticky note and stick them on the relevant area. Then you can update or move them as needed.

For further information talk to your GP or ring the Veterans' MATES Helpline on 1300 556 906.

Useful websites about understanding pain, pain management strategies and who can help:

- **painHEALTH** <https://painhealth.csse.uwa.edu.au/pain-management/>
- **Pain Management Network** <http://www.aci.health.nsw.gov.au/chronic-pain-for-everyone/introduction-to-pain>
- **Pain Australia** <http://www.painaustralia.org.au/getting-help/getting-the-right-care>
- **Chronic Pain Australia** <http://chronicpainaustralia.org.au/chronic-pain/the-pain-journey>
- **NPS MedicineWise** <https://www.nps.org.au/medical-info/consumer-info/chronic-pain-explained?c=what-is-chronic-pain-e25c6ccf>
- **Mindspot clinic** offers a free online pain course, including consultation and support from a therapist <https://mindspot.org.au/about-pain>



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