How **Physical Therapy** Can Help If You Suffer From **Chronic Pain**

If you suffer from chronic pain, you've probably at some point been told that you're supposed to stay as active as possible. However the thought probably makes you cringe, especially when sometimes, just getting through the day at home or work is hard enough. This is where a physical therapist can help. They can give you a personalised strengthening and exercise plan, and help you learn how to manage your daily life and reduce pain through certain treatments.

Physical therapy treatments can come in many forms, and sometimes more than one treatment may be needed. Pain is as unique as the people who it affects and successful treatment is all about tailoring a solution to your individual situation, pain type and patterns.

Another very important component of your therapy is the relationship you have with your physical therapist. While this relationship may be an 'on-again, off-again' one that may span months or even years, it is essential you connect and develop belief and trust in him/her. This is crucial because an important part of your physical therapy will involve discussing and understanding your pain, talking during the treatment sessions, working on activity plans and pacing or goal setting with you. The role of your physical therapist in your pain management, should be one of partner and facilitator of the process.

Physical therapy includes both passive and active treatments. Passive treatments help to relax you and your body, and are called 'passive' because you don't have to actively participate.

Your physical therapy programme may start with passive treatments, or they may be used during bad flare-ups, but the real goal is to get into active treatments. These are therapeutic exercises that strengthen your body and help you deal with the chronic pain, ultimately giving you more confidence and independence.





PASSIVE PHYSICAL THERAPY

These treatments include:

- **Deep tissue massage:** This technique targets spasms and chronic muscle tension that perhaps builds up through daily life stress. You could also have spasms or muscle tension because of strains or sprains. The therapist uses direct pressure and friction to try to release the tension in your soft tissues (ligaments, tendons, muscles).
- **Manual therapy:** This is a hands-on treatment used to mobilise and manipulate joints that maybe stiff and contributing to your pain.
- **Hot and cold therapy:** Your physical therapist will alternate between hot and cold therapies. By using heat, more blood flows to the target area, an increased blood flow brings more oxygen and nutrients to that area. Blood is also needed to remove waste by-products created by muscle spasms, and it also helps healing.Cold therapy, also called cryotherapy, slows circulation, helping to reduce inflammation, muscle spasms, and pain. You may have a cold pack placed upon the target area, or even be given an ice massage. These are treatments you can use at home. Get advice from your therapist about what to use and for how long, once home.
- **Transcutaneous Nerve Stimulation (TENS):** TENS machines stimulate your muscles through variable (but safe) intensities of electrical current. TENS helps reduce muscle spasms, and it may increase your body's production of endorphins, your natural pain killers. If you find this helpful small machines for home use can be purchased. Your therapist can advise you on what to buy and give you lessons on how to use it safely.
- **Ultrasound:** By increasing blood circulation, ultrasound helps reduce muscle spasms, cramping, swelling, stiffness, and pain. It does this by sending sound waves deep into your muscle tissues, creating a gentle heat that enhances circulation and healing.
- **Dry needling:** This is a form of acupuncture in which the therapist inserts small needles into trigger points in the muscles to release spasm, promote healing and reduce pain
- **Strapping or bracing:** This can be applied to support a specific joint or muscle or to help correct posture and alignment that may be contributing to your pain.






Passive therapies, such as those listed above, are generally done in conjunction with active therapies.

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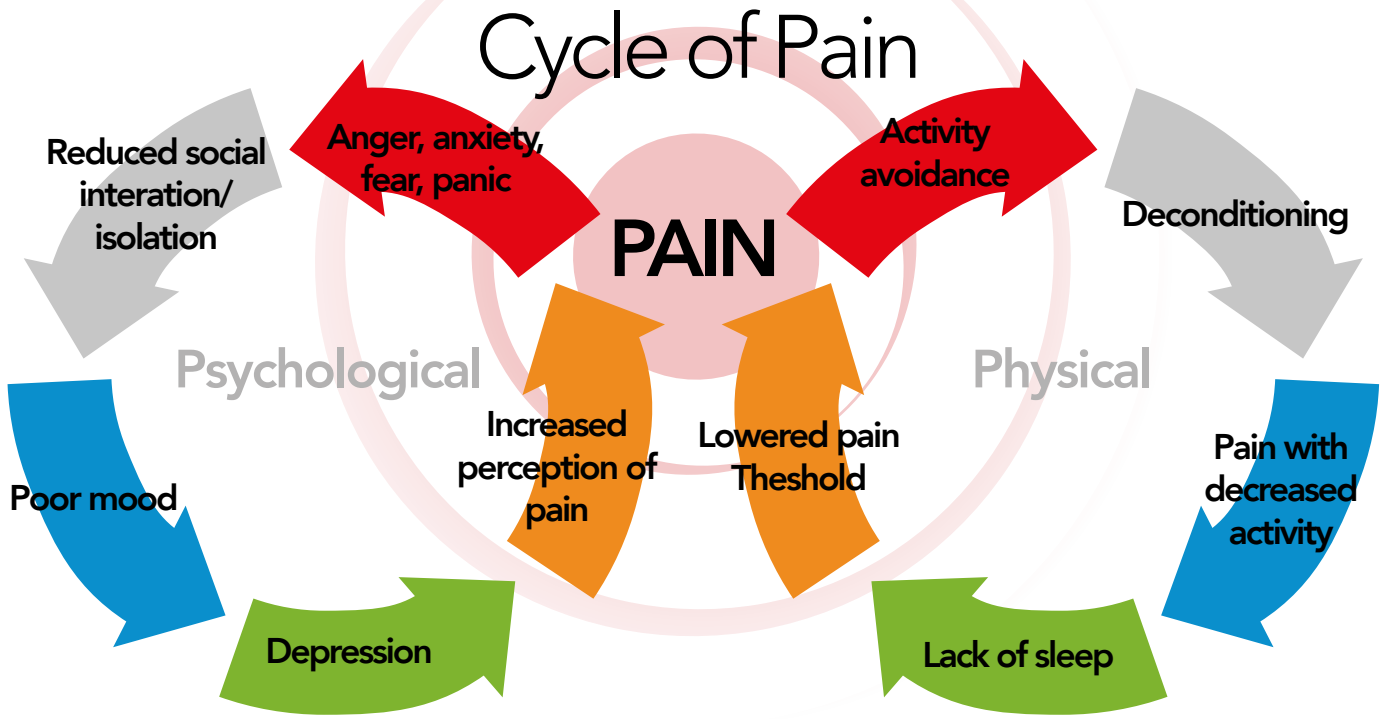
ACTIVE PHYSICAL THERAPY

In the active part of physical therapy, your therapist will teach you various exercises to improve your flexibility, strength, core stability, and range of motion (the range your joints can move through). Your therapist will also work with you to find which activities will suit you best and help keep you motivated.

Your physical therapist will also help you to correct any postural issues that may be contributing to your pain, and advise you on how to set up your desk and computer optimally, or how to lift or carry things without harming yourself. This is all part of the "self-care" or "self-treatment" aspect of physical therapy. Through physical therapy, you learn good habits and principles that enable you to take better care of your body.

Why is exercise and being active so important if you suffer from chronic pain?

Chronic pain patients are often caught in a cycle where they avoid activity because it causes pain which in turn leads to inactivity. This creates an unhealthy lifestyle, which in turn reduces strength, endurance, range of motion of your joints and muscles and affects your overall sense of wellbeing and confidence. As you get weaker, you become more susceptible to injury and unable to work through the healing process. And so the cycle continues.



There are many benefits to exercise, which essentially help to break that cycle of disuse:

1. **It keeps your joints moving well:** This is especially important if your chronic pain is caused by a form of arthritis.
2. **It helps to keep your muscles strong:** Strong muscles support your body and bones better, which is particularly important for patients with chronic pain. The stronger your muscles, the less likely you are to tire as easily when doing an activity. Strong muscles are also less likely to fatigue and go into a spasm which results in pain.
3. **Staying active is good for your mental health:** It is common for chronic pain patients to struggle with depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues because it becomes difficult to live your life in the same way that you have always done. Staying active can help boost self-esteem and make you feel like you're doing something to fight your pain and its effect on your life. Exercising with friends or joining a gym is a good way to both motivate yourself and reap the social benefits of exercise.
4. **It helps you maintain a healthy weight, lose weight and avoid obesity:** Extra weight can add to your pain, particularly if you have chronic back and joint pain. By making healthy nutritional choices and staying physically fit, you can avoid adding this additional strain to your body.
5. **Fitness level:** Doing exercise will make you fitter – that is your cardiovascular fitness. Your heart rate won't race so much when you do something and nor will you be so breathless. The fitter you are the less tired you feel, which makes it easier to go about your daily chores or work.

Your physical therapist can help in planning your exercise and activities as well as explaining the principles of pacing. Once you realise that freedom from pain is possible, and that a healthy lifestyle, routine exercise, and proper nutrition leading to overall fitness will help maintain that freedom, you will become more confident and better able to manage your pain, both physically as well as psychologically.

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