

'Adversity reveals genius'

– Horace –

■ Introduction

Whatever the cause of pain, whether from an injury such as a broken leg, a disease such as arthritis, an infection such as shingles, or even if the cause of the pain has never been discovered, there are things that you can do that might help. Firstly it is important to understand that there is not a simple one-to-one direct relationship between tissue damage and pain. It is not simple a message like a telephone call from your body to your brain saying something is wrong. Rather, it is thought that nerve impulses from the tissue have to pass through a 'gate' situated in the spinal column and these impulses are altered by messages from the brain concerning how we think and feel. Some mental and emotional states open and some close this so-called 'pain gate'.

■ Factors which open the pain gate and pain gets worse

- ➊ **Physical damage:** The size and type of injury can influence the way we feel pain.
- ➋ **Low activity:** We notice pain much more if we are less active because activity has a distracting effect.
- ➌ **Depression/helplessness:** We can easily get into the vicious circle of doing less, which means we have fewer positive events in our lives and fewer opportunities for enjoyment. Our mood goes down and the pain becomes worse.
- ➍ **Anger:** If we are angry at the medical services for not providing a 'cure', or angry at the disability, asking 'why me?' our experience of pain is likely to increase.
- ➎ **Stress and tension:** Physical muscle tension opens the pain gate and we experience more pain.
- ➏ **Painwatching:** If you sit and think about your pain and notice it very carefully then it hurts more.
- ➐ **Fear about what the pain is:** Accurate information about the source of your pain is nearly always much less frightening than your

secret worries about what is causing your pain. Many people secretly worry that there is something seriously wrong with them which can lead to an increase in tension.

- ➑ **Pain behaviour:** People only know about your pain by your pain behaviour, which includes things like grimacing, crying, moaning and complaining about the pain. Those around usually respond positively with sympathy and attention. It is easy to see how unconsciously tempting it must be to show a little more pain behaviour to remind others that all is not well. It is important for pain sufferers to look carefully at the messages they give out, as subconsciously the positive responses of others may be reinforcing or increasing the pain behaviour and your experience of pain.
- ➒ **Loss of independence:** If family and friends do things for the sufferer it is possible that the person will lose their independence. This engenders a loss of feelings of control which is likely to increase awareness of pain. Even if it takes two hours to prepare the vegetables and somebody else could have done them much quicker, it is still important to do the task to maintain that sense of independence and control.

■ Factors which close the pain gate and reduce the pain

- ➓ **Pain killers:** Some painkillers will make you notice the pain less.
- ➑ **Counter-stimulation:** Heat treatment, cold compresses or even massage can help spread the effects of the pain and close the pain gate.
- ➒ **Keeping busy:** Being busy helps switch your attention off the pain and helps close the pain gate.
- ➓ **Being relaxed:** Learning to relax and turn off tension reduces the pain messages getting through.
- ➑ **Setting realistic goals for your life:** Achieving small goals helps to reduce feelings of helplessness and tension.