



Emotional responses to pain

Pain can have a big impact on emotions and thinking– some people feel frustration, anger, sadness, anxious and fearful when they are in pain. People also report that at times of stress their pain symptoms increase. We help people find ways to respond to these difficult feelings using skills such as mindfulness and other techniques.

Responses to Pain

The experience of pain is made up of different components; sensory (the discomfort), how we respond in terms of thinking when we feel pain, and our emotional response during pain. People often report a range of emotions when living with persistent pain. Emotions such as sadness, anger, frustration, anxiety, and fear are all part of the normal human response to feeling pain.

For example, often people find that they are very worried about making their pain worse and they might feel anxious when thinking about doing certain activities such as walking or exercising. They often report avoiding such activities because they feel afraid it will make their pain worse or they will cause some damage to occur in their body.

It is also common to feel frustrated when living with pain. People often report feeling frustrated that they cannot find a cure or solution, or cannot control their pain. They also often report feeling frustrated that they are unable to live the way they used to, before pain became a problem.

When pain has been around a long time, it is common that people report losses in their life; work, socialising, exercise, independence and loss of identity are all frequently reported to be affected by persistent pain. It is normal then that the response to this is to feel upset, sad or depressed.

Here at the Camden Pain Service, we recognise the emotional response to pain as being understandable and normal. We sometimes refer to this as secondary suffering, where pain is the primary problem. As we work with people who have persistent pain, with no clear way to reduce or fix this problem, we aim to support people to manage some of the emotional responses to pain. We find in practice that if people manage the emotions better they are more able to connect with things in life that are important to them such as relationships, hobbies and physical activity.

We support people by equipping them with practices that have been shown to be effective in helping to manage the emotional response to living with persistent pain, such as mindfulness. As well as developing a better understanding of how to notice when different emotions are present by looking at the relationship between emotions, thinking, bodily sensations and how they influence how we behave as humans. We also aim to help people to improve communication, and develop more self-compassion as we know that these can also help manage difficult emotions more effectively.