



Relationships and communication

Pain can have a significant impact on how people see themselves, such as struggling with loss or changes in role, identity, impact on confidence or perhaps not feeling like the person they used to be. We can help support people to navigate this time of understandable adjustment, such as introducing skills to help to notice how their mind responds, acknowledging understandable emotions which can come along in response and to find ways to perhaps be kinder and less hard on themselves.

Pain can also have an impact on relationships with others and we know good social contacts can be very important for health and wellbeing. We can support you by helping you to think about your needs and ways of communicating your needs with other people in your life.

Relationship to self

In response to chronic pain, people may notice themselves thinking about what they used to do and comparing this with the here and now. This can potentially bring up a range of difficult feelings, such as anger, loss, frustration, sadness, guilt. At times of struggle, being human, people may notice at these times they may be hard on themselves, which can unintentionally leave them feeling more upset and a vicious cycle of difficult thoughts and feelings can emerge.

As a next step, it can be helpful to start to notice how you talk to yourself and perhaps notice if there are times you are hard on yourself. Sometimes we can be caring and kind to others, but find it difficult to be kind to ourselves. Due to this, it might be helpful to ask yourself the question – what would I say to a friend to support them if they were going through a difficult time/ similar situation? And how could I start to apply this to myself – what can I tell myself when I am struggling (as I would a close friend)?

Chronic pain can trigger a threat response and self-critical responses can be an additional threat, which can activate the stress response system (the way the mind and body reacts to threats). Learning and developing ways to shift towards being kind and non-judgemental in response to suffering and recognising you are human, can be a way to calm and slow down the system, but not directly control the system. It may be helpful to ask yourself what you need at difficult times and what activities do you find nourishing (what do I find can help recharge my battery)?

Relationship with others and communication

Living with pain can be isolating. People may find it difficult to explain their pain to others and possibly may not feel understood. They may find themselves withdrawing from people in their life, trying to put on a brave face or perhaps seeing less of friends. At times, people may understandably struggle with the emotional impact and toll of persistent pain, and may find themselves possibly feeling more irritable, snappy, and quieter, distracted, or perhaps having



less tolerance due to the impact of chronic pain. They may notice changes in how they used to be and may struggle with seeing friends and family owing to the related difficult feelings which may show up. The impact of pain is a very individual and personal experience.

It can be very difficult to fully convey to another person what is like to have pain and people may struggle to know how best to support people. Others may be left feeling helpless, or perhaps responding in ways which the person suffering with pain may not always find helpful. Communication between people can be very complex and we may find ourselves falling into the very understandable human thinking trap of second guessing what we think people are thinking (mindreading) or perhaps hoping others may be able to know what we are thinking. This can raise the possibility of misunderstandings, and assumptions, which may create a strain on relationships.

A helpful focus may be to communicate to people what you need more or less of due to the impact of pain. Drawing on the skill of assertiveness is acknowledging your needs and clearly expressing them, as well as also putting yourself in the other person's shoes, in the hope the message will be communicated clearly.

Here are some examples of statements which may be helpful suggestions/ideas around communicating with others around pain, depending on your experience and what is relevant/resonates with you. It might also be useful to think about who is important to you to communicate with.

- 'If I am short with you, please excuse me, it's not you, it's because my pain is bad '
- 'Please don't ask me constantly how my pain is, I will let you know when I want to talk about it'
- 'When I have a flare up in my pain you can best support me by...'
- 'This is a long-term condition and I have to manage it daily. I will have good days and bad days '