



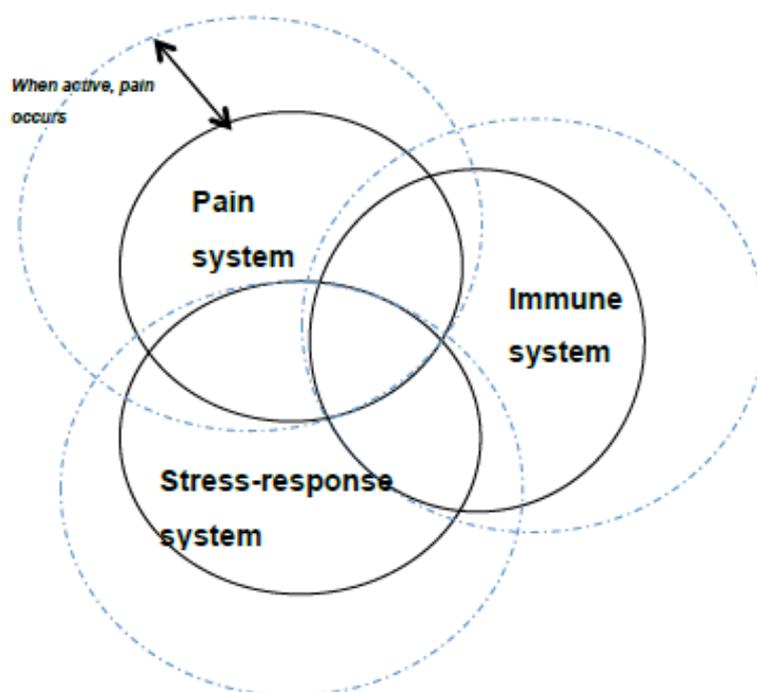
## Understanding Your Pain

It is natural to worry about what pain means in the body, why it is there and why it persists. Tests and investigations are often unable to explain pain and this can be frustrating. We often find that people have found explanations confusing or don't feel they have been believed.

We will listen to your concerns and work with you to understand what is going on in your body and why the pain isn't going away. We have found that when people understand pain better they are able to move forwards with less worry and become more confident to return to activities that matter to them.

These systems are designed to respond to *perceived* danger. Sometimes they are very quiet, but they are still on and alert (like a smoke alarm). At other times they are very noisy, and might cause pain. Many things will contribute to this process.

Like all our protective systems, pain can be helpful when it is well calibrated to risks or dangers; but, like the other protective systems, it can cause problems if it becomes too protective (eg; phobias; allergies; autoimmune disease).



The *sensitivity* of the pain system is designed to change. It will change due to things like injury, lack of sleep, or prolonged activity. In the longer term, it will change with experience: in other words, it learns. If the pain system learns to be more sensitive (a well-established fact in persistent pain), it can lead to pain with things that might not be dangerous, such as gentle movement, or day to day activities, sometimes even gentle touch! Even if *we know* that these movements aren't dangerous, it doesn't stop pain. We aren't in direct control of the pain system, just as we can't directly control our immune system, or how we react to a sudden fright.

Pain is designed to keep us from harm, but when it's persistent and has learned to occur more easily, it can stop us from doing important things. If we can work with a pain system that is in constant flux, then we can sometimes choose how to respond to pain.

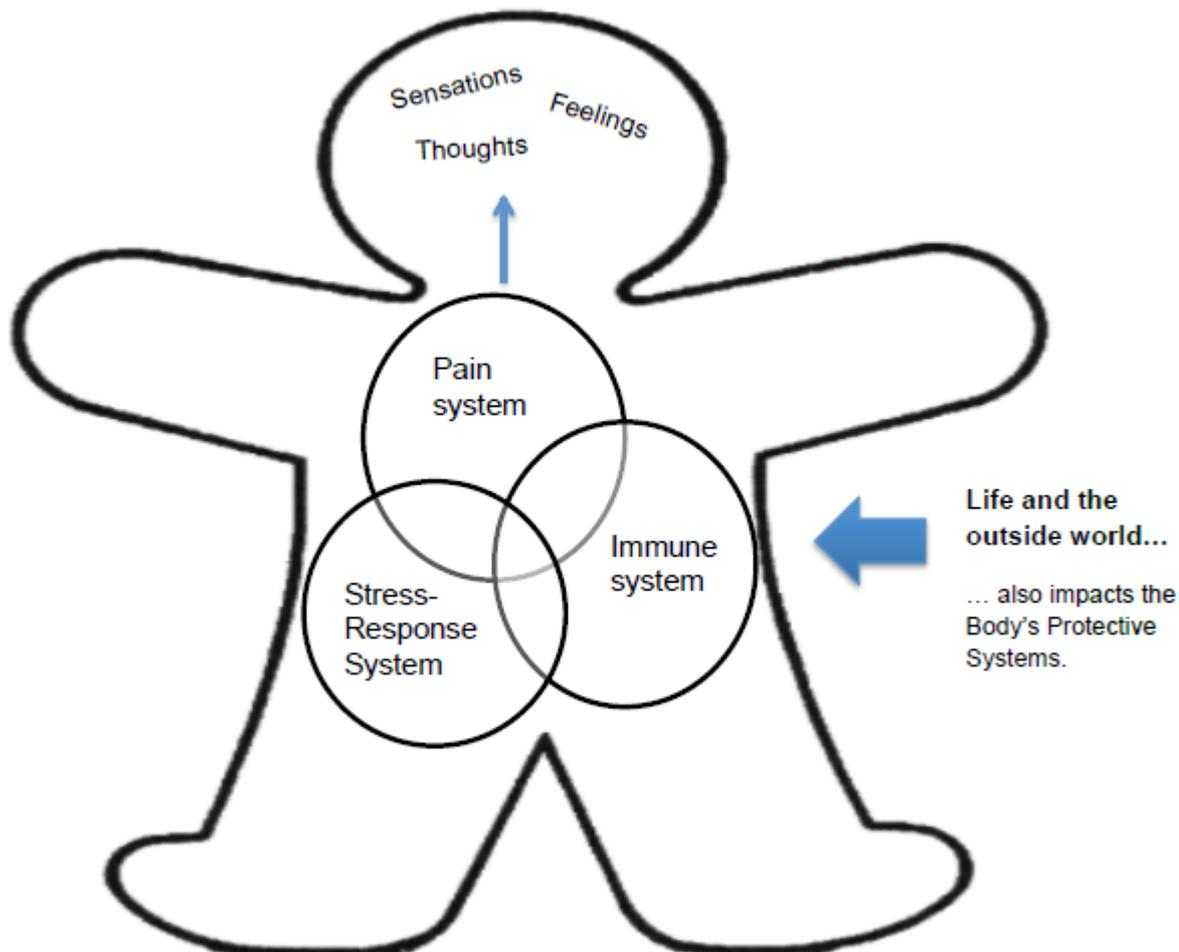
It's worth thinking about the purpose of the pain when we experience it, but also to stop & think: "what should I do about it?" We can react in a very automatic or habitual way, or we may pause a moment or two, and then chose a different response.

Our reaction or responses to pain will influence our body's protective systems, and can either sensitise them further, or help desensitise them. This is how the pain system learns and changes over time. This is a *normal process* and is happening in all of us, all the time.



**The Body's Protective Systems live inside us all...**

... and, they impact us by creating sensations, symptoms (sensations we don't want), thoughts, and feelings. These things impact our behaviour.



- We are designed to notice symptoms and try to reduce them. We do this through action (behaviour). Behaviours include things like changing position, stretching, taking medication, seeking help, avoiding an activity, rest, or pushing through pain, *and many more...*

- To reduce symptoms we do certain things, or act in certain ways. These behaviours can be helpful or unhelpful. What might be helpful for a new or short-term symptom might not be helpful for persistent pain. Many symptom-reducing behaviours for new or novel pain don't tend to work so well for persistent pain and might even cause further problems.

**We sometimes need to evaluate if our reactions to pain are still helpful.  
If they're not, we can experiment with different strategies.  
This is the essence of pain management.**



## Resources:

There are many different online resources that can help patients and clinicians understand pain better. Here are a few ideas of where to look:

### YouTube clips:

- A short, illustrated clip to understand persistent pain in less than 5 minutes: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C\\_3phB93rvI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_3phB93rvI)
- 10 helpful facts to dispel myths about back pain, presented by patients: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hif5Cxikdmo>
- Prof Peter O'Sullivan discusses some of the myths about back pain which are widely held and negatively impact on the perception and treatment of back pain: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dISQLUE4brQ>

### Websites:

- A website designed to bring up to date information to pain patients and improve understanding of pain rehabilitation. <http://www.retrainpain.org/>
- Aims to inform patients and clinicians about the latest pain research and dispel myths about pain. <http://www.pain-ed.com/>
- Resources and patient stories to explore our understanding and responses to pain. <https://www.tamethebeast.org/>

### Booklets:

- A booklet that introduces scientific findings to help think differently about pain and understand it better. <https://www.knowpain.co.uk/persistent-pain-education-booklet/>
- Booklets on understanding pain for patients as well as information for patients and clinicians on all aspects of pain management. [www.britishpainsociety.org](http://www.britishpainsociety.org)