



The multidimensional nature of pain

Given the complex nature of pain, there are many unique factors that can influence a pain experience. While pain management can seem complicated, overwhelming, and perhaps a little frustrating - there can be good news too! If there are numerous contributing factors, there are also numerous ways an Exercise Physiologist can help to manage your pain.

Contributing factors

- ◆ **Tissue** - Have you been told that you have muscle tears or a bulging disc? These factors may be important, but they are rarely the sole contributor to your pain if you've had it for a long time.
- ◆ **Physical Habits** - Sometimes you might 'brace' your core before you bend or lift, because it is commonly taught that this protects your back. There is no strong research to support this. Instead, you might be making your muscles sore and sensitising your nervous system. If you clenched your hand all day, your hand would start to ache, right? And it would feel better to relax, right?
- ◆ **Physical Impairments** - When you do try to move differently, you might be unable to do this because of a lack of strength, balance or flexibility.
- ◆ **Meaningful Activity** - When you are in pain, you stop doing the things you love. Ask yourself, if I didn't have the pain tomorrow, what would I do? Nothing is off limits; you just need to find the right starting point and develop a graded plan.
- ◆ **Lifestyle/Health/Social Factors** - In what areas of your life can you be healthier? Sleep? Stress? Work-life balance? Weight management?
- ◆ **Coping Strategies** - Do you avoid painful movements or push through painful movements? Stopping actions that are important to you can lead to increased sensitivity. Push through actions that aggravate you and you will never get a chance to settle down. You need to find the right balance.
- ◆ **Emotional & Psychological Factors** - Fear, depression, anxiety, financial stress and anger can all contribute to your sensitivity and pain. Reach out for help if needed!
- ◆ **Beliefs** - If you believe that move-ment and load is bad for the body and will cause injury, then you are likely to avoid it - even though we know that movement is good for us. Your beliefs might lead to bad decisions for your pain.



The cup analogy

Consider all of these factors 'stressors', and then consider the amount of water inside a cup as an example of stressors. Sometimes, some or all of the stressors may increase enough for the level of water in the cup to rise until the water overflows; this represents a pain experience. You can then either attempt to bring down the level of water in the cup (reduce the level of stress) or build a bigger cup (increase your ability to tolerate stress).

Can we reduce what is in your cup and/or can we build a bigger cup?

The answer is different for each individual, which is why it is so important to discuss your multidimensional pain experience with your Exercise Physiologist.

References:

- Booth, J et al. (2017). Exercise for chronic musculoskeletal pain: A biopsychosocial approach. *Musculoskeletal Care*.
- Lehman, G. (2017). Recovery strategies: pain guidebook. Retrieved from <http://www.greglehman.ca/recovery-strategies-pain-guidebook>