

# Statewide Persistent Pain Management Network



## Persistent Pain Education Series

### Psychology and Persistent Pain

#### I have been referred to a psychologist. Does this mean the pain is all in my head?

No, it is not all in your head - you are not crazy and you are not making it up! It can be really frustrating when others cannot see your pain or when it feels that nobody believes you.

Persistent pain is a very real and personal experience.

Around 20% of the population experiences persistent pain. Everyone's pain is different and you are the only one who will ever know your pain. Pain is both a **physical sensation and an emotional experience**, affecting how we feel, what we think and what we do. Ongoing pain can have a big impact on many areas of your life. Psychologists who specialise in persistent pain can help you to reduce the impact of pain and to re-engage in activities that are important to you.



#### What does psychology have to do with persistent pain?

Psychologically, pain can affect us in a number of ways:

- Pain can change our behaviour and our thoughts. Worrying about pain or seeing it as a sign of damage or threat to the body can lead to anxiety and avoidant behaviour.
- When we attempt to avoid pain, we miss out on social, work and physical activities that are important or enjoyable, leading to feelings of depression, frustration or grief.
- The more we avoid activities or situations to avoid pain, the smaller our lives can become, which affects our sense of happiness, fulfilment and confidence.

The impact of pain on someone's life can also lead to the development of additional problems, including low mood, anxiety symptoms, stress, interrupted sleep, fatigue, and memory or concentration problems, and even thoughts about self-harm.

### Assessment and Treatment

Your GP may refer you to see a private psychologist through a **Mental Health Care Plan**. Community-based psychologists help people with a range of problems or symptoms, including:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Stress
- Sleep problems
- Adjustment issues
- Post-traumatic stress
- Relationship issues
- Grief and loss
- Pain management
- Drug and alcohol problems



Your brain and nervous system want to protect you and pain is your brain's way of keeping you safe. Our environment, the people around us, our thoughts, beliefs, values, emotions and actions can influence how much pain we experience. If you attend a pain management clinic you may be assessed by a psychologist who specialises in persistent pain. They will typically ask you about the ways in which pain impacts on your **mood, sleep, relationships** and **activities** including work, social activities and daily household tasks. The pain psychologist will help you find ways of increasing the amount of safety messages to reduce the level of threat to the nervous system, resulting in less pain.

Group-based pain rehabilitation programs at pain clinics will typically include sessions run by a psychologist. Treatments for pain typically focus on:

- helping you learn more about what is happening in your body when you experience persistent pain and how your **behaviour** has changed in response to pain;
- building **awareness** of how life has changed and what is really important to you, with a view to **reconnecting with valued areas of life**;
- examining your struggle with pain and exploring how to change your **relationship with pain**;
- understanding how the **things we think and do** can influence our pain experience;
- assisting with strategies to help you engage in more **meaningful activities** despite pain;
- developing methods to **handle difficult thoughts or feelings** that are common when experiencing pain;

Evidence-based psychological treatments for pain include:

- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)
- Behaviour Therapy
- Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)
- Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)

## Additional resources

### 1300 MH CALL

Ph: 1300 64 22 55

### Alcohol and Drug Information Services,

[www.adin.com.au](http://www.adin.com.au)

Ph: 1800 177 833

### Arafmi QLD, [www.arafmiqld.org](http://www.arafmiqld.org)

Ph: 1800 351 881

### Lifeline, [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

Ph: 13 11 14 (24 hours)

### Mental Health Association QLD,

[www.hoa.mentalhealth.org.au](http://www.hoa.mentalhealth.org.au)

Ph: 1300 726 686

## Online resources

### ACI Website

<https://www.aci.health.nsw.gov.au/chronic-pain/for-everyone/pain-and-thoughts>

### Mindspot Program

<https://mindspot.org.au/pain-course>

### eCentreClinic Pain Course

<https://ecentreclinic.org/?q=PainCourse>