



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Do you believe that my pain is real?

Yes! Pain is a signal from your brain and body. The brain network receives many signals, including physical and emotional, that are processed to create your perception of pain.

I am here for pain, why would I want to talk about stress and emotions?

It is common to feel down, worried or angry when in pain. A common reaction is to avoid stress and emotions, but this approach often leads to more stress and unhelpful coping, causing more pain.

There are many factors that cause and worsen pain. Once chronic, it is hard to get rid of pain using medications or procedures. Helpful management strategies often include learning how to better cope with pain, associated stress and any contributing emotions.

I worry there is something seriously wrong with me. Does this mean we won't try to get to the bottom of the cause?

It will be difficult to reduce fear and examine other possibilities if you believe that you are in serious danger. It is important to review your concerns with your physicians in order to be able to consider other approaches.

What might be suggested after an assessment?

Management goals will be determined between you and the treatment team. Recommendations may include tools for coping, medications, talk therapy or groups to better understand and manage pain and emotions.



Toronto Academic Pain Medicine Institute

THE PAIN-EMOTION CONNECTION

WOULD A MENTAL HEALTH ASSESSMENT BE RIGHT FOR ME?

Pain is a danger alarm that may continue to be activated long after physical damage is healed. The same pain brain pathways are triggered by both physical and emotional causes. Ongoing pain may result in stressful and emotional reactions. You may be unaware of some of the emotional or stress triggers that keep your brain's pain pathways activated.

THE PAIN PATHWAY IS TRIGGERED BY

- ▶ PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL & SOCIAL THREATS
- ▶ HABITUALLY REPEATED ACTIVATION
- ▶ EXPECTATIONS & BELIEFS ABOUT DANGER

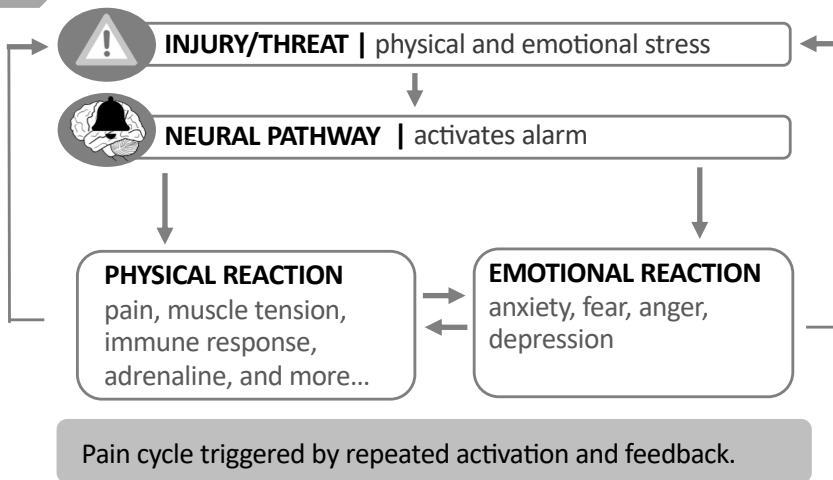
A MENTAL HEALTH ASSESSMENT expands the lens of pain management. It can help identify possible psychosocial pain triggers to help guide treatment.



THE SCIENCE OF PAIN AND EMOTIONS

Chronic pain persists through an over-sensitized pathway in the nervous system that keeps sounding the body's danger alarm, regardless of how the pain started. The pain neural pathway is a network of thousands of connected cells that tells us we are in danger, but sometimes this pathway malfunctions. The emotion areas of the brain are part of this pathway and may fuel the pain and danger cycle. The more the pain pathway is activated, the more these connections are reinforced. (SEE DIAGRAM BELOW)

STRESS & EMOTIONS SENSITIZES THE PAIN PATHWAY



Pain pathways may be activated by many inputs, including feelings and stress. Our thinking and emotions help evaluate incoming information to our brain. The brain interprets and reacts the same to emotional and physical threats turning on the danger signal. Stressful childhood events prime this danger system and increase the likelihood of suffering from chronic pain. Later stressors or injuries can reactivate this threat detection system.



ASSESSMENT AND TREATMENT

Understanding your pain can help guide treatment.

When pain is caused by an injury, the brain tells us to slow down and attend to the damage. We react to the pain alarm signal by trying to find the cause and fix it. Having a better understanding of the factors that maintain pain will help you understand why the danger alarm is sounding and find the best tools to reset it.

When is a mental health assessment helpful for me?

- I am feeling distressed, depressed, hopeless, angry, anxious, worried or panicked a lot of the time.
- When I get stressed, anxious or depressed, I find it hard to do things that help my pain condition.
- My pain fluctuates with no obvious cause.
- I wonder about a stress-pain connection and I have not had success with other treatments.
- While trying to cope with pain, I am having a hard time with my family, friends or health care team.

What if I change my mind about an assessment?

It is understandable that you might change your mind or not feel ready. It is important to contact your pain clinic to cancel the appointment so the physician is not waiting for you and another patient can be seen.