

# Back Pain Truths (& Dispelling Myths)

## ***Change Your Attitude, Ease Your Back Pain***

By James Bone

I am constantly finding that people are uncertain and confused about back pain, and having read a very good book recently called "Defeat Chronic Pain Now" by Dr Galer & Dr Argoff, I thought it was time again to address the back pain issue.

As a back pain sufferer myself, due to the rare condition of Spondylololysis, I have learned the truth of modern research, that much of the back pain issue is not related to structural problems, but due to stress, how we think about the problem, and how we learn to move, think or live our lives to minimise triggers, which may lead to back pain issues.

The problem in our society is we are confronted by good marketing, media, jargon (medical language making it difficult to understand) and wrong messages about back pain, and it takes time and effort to change this perception.

*The informed health practitioner is someone who has an understanding of the mind-body nature of the pain experience and recommends treatments from a mind body perspective. Dr D Lewis Rheumatologist*

## **We need a shift in our thinking to better deal with back pain**

### ***Back Pain Confusions or Misperceptions:***

- *Back pain is a serious condition.*

Wrong - back pain is rarely a serious condition. A 2009 Australian study found in 1200 people with back pain, the only serious condition found was spinal fractures in 9 people. The pain of spasm can be NASTY, but just like a nasty cramp it's not necessarily serious.

- *Back pain is a mechanical/structural problem - the disc being a major cause of back pain.*

Wrong again – the majority of back pain is non-specific, often associated with muscle spasm. In fact a study found that stress was a better predictor (3 x more) for future back pain than an MRI result displaying the health of the structures. Even if a disc injury is a problem for you, research suggests it often heals itself.

- *Pain down my leg is due to a pinched nerve in my back.*

Maybe, but rarely, as it is more likely referred pain. As David Butler, a wise Australian physio says, nerves get pinched when we look up at the stars. It's actually hard to pinch & injure a nerve. More likely the nerve becomes sensitive. (see about pain below)

- *Bad posture, sitting too much, or lifting cause chronic back pain.*

Wrong – Many systematic reviews (gold standard studies) have found that this is rarely the direct cause of ongoing back pain.

- *Muscle imbalances and weak CORE muscles cause back pain.*

Not necessarily, as this is an over simplification of the issue. (see Pain explained below.) They may play some role in moving more properly, which may also have a benefit in reducing back pain.

- *That some one can fix you or has the magic bullet solution.*

Wrong - as pain is a complex Bio (body) Psycho (mind) Social (environment) issue. There is no one solution to back pain, but there is a process of determining what works best for you.

- *I need an X-ray or MRI to find out what is going on.*

Wrong - there is often little connection to what shows on an X-ray and what you experience with pain.

- *Surgery is a quick fix solution to your problem.*

Wrong - don't race into surgery; it is only required for rare situations (see below) – seek second or third opinions first.

### ***Back Pain Truths:***

- One of the most powerful truths is that body tissue injury (ie back structures) does not equal pain, meaning that 'back discs don't hurt', and the relationship between pain and the state of the tissues becomes weaker as pain persists ie it becomes more chronic.

We need a conceptual change in what we think pain is:

Pain is a conscious experience that depends on the brain evaluating many inputs not just those from the body tissues. Pain is not a direct measure of injury or tissue damage. An unconscious brain cannot experience pain. Psychological and social factors cannot be separated from physical factors when evaluating or modifying the pain experience.

This is exactly what the pain system in every living organism is designed to do:

- To alert us to take protective action.
- To deal with a threat to survival.
- *Pain occurs when the brain "thinks" the body is in danger.*

Sometimes something can go wrong in the nervous system (due to biopsychosocial reasons) where the pain process can become SENSITISED. This means that the pain experience becomes much easier to activate. Even a light touch may feel painful.

Pain prevents us living our life in a "normal" way. It impinges on everything we do. It hurts! Pain is a message. How we "hear" this message and what actions we take determines how well pain is managed.

*Discs can never hurt; when injured they can send messages to the brain to indicate injury. The pain experience is a product of the brain. Saying discs hurt, is like saying that genital stimulation leads to love.*

Research suggests that knowing the truth about pain helps to reduce pain.

- You probably have your own unique set of trigger factors due to your own mind body environmental experience.

- Stress & Emotional Issues play a major part in the pain experience.

The stress reaction is a mind body response where the brain sends out a cascade of nervous system, hormonal system, and immune system responses to the body in response to threat, real or imagined. It can affect every body system. We are all familiar with irritable bowel syndrome, and also how we tend to get constipated or the trots when under stress. In the same way, one can also call back pain "irritable back syndrome" as it can be stress activated. Research indicates that there is an optimal level of stress, but if we get stress too often or the response fails to turn off, then it leads towards pain issues and many other chronic issues.

Poor work satisfaction and lack of control has also been associated with back pain. How many of us feel happy with/at our work, and is it any wonder there is so much back pain?

*From a T Shirt "It is just as far to run a 6 minute mile as a 10 minute mile. So.... run easy." A reminder that simply adjusting our expectations and self imposed demands can make a big difference. Dr D Lewis Rheumatologist*

- Many people with chronic back pain develop depression and/or anxiety issues, which can influence how well they deal with pain. Counselling may help. We can develop anxiety and fear to the pain, through the things we say to ourselves, and the things others say. Even health professionals with good intentions can say something that may set fear going or movement avoidance behaviour. Anticipating back pain causes us to change how we move, which may lead to factors leading to more back pain – a vicious cycle. A study found that our belief that back pain is more physical based is also more likely to lead us toward disability with back pain.
- The immune and inflammatory response is all part of the big picture of back pain (more about this at another time).

### ***Managing Back Pain more effectively:***

- Recovery is possible. It is now well understood that brain function is not fixed. You are not stuck with what you have. The brain is part of every illness, injury and pain. Brain function is intimately related to your health and with understanding and practice, the brain can be changed to improve your health.
- Managing pain starts with you.
- Some aches and pains just need to let be – “it’s only back pain; it will pass.”  
*Even with those severe back spasms, there is no need to panic. Stop, breathe, relax, remind yourself its just a spasm, and stay active as you can.*
- However if you have doubts, don’t understand what is going on, or feel you can’t cope with the problem, then it is time to get assistance.
- Get properly assessed from some one who understands the pain truths.
- Some treatments can speak to your nervous system, helping you to feel supported, and assist with dealing with pain eg Bowen, acupuncture, massage, mobilisation, but these need to be secondary to understanding the truth about pain, dealing with stress and emotions, and working at all levels of your mind, body and environment. Speak to your doctor/pharmacist about simple medications, which may help you sleep, if pain is an issue. Sleep is important to recovery.
- An interesting Swedish study found that back pain could be improved by teaching people to move in more integrated and smooth ways. People learnt to be more aware of their movement and in this way helped them to better deal with back pain. I believe moving well is an important part of wellbeing. Moving well may incorporate many facets including body awareness, good core control, balance, strength and proper muscle control.
- Some fitness and strength training also goes a long way toward helping, especially if you have a tendency toward muscle spasms.
- Amazing how yoga can help put all this together. Research and experience suggest that slower more gentle Hatha type yoga is best for back pain, and pain conditions in general.

### **When to seek urgent medical help:**

- Severe weakness in leg or foot
- Severe night pain
- Bowel or bladder control issues

- Fever, hot or unwell
- History of cancer or unexplained weight loss
- Severe trauma

**Reading:**

- Galer. Argoff "Defeat Chronic Pain Now" 2010 Quayside Publishing Group
- Neil O'Connell "Back Pain Myths Closing Sale Everything must go"  
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- "Yoga Alleviates Pain And Improves Function In Fibromyalgia Patients"  
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- "Yoga Relieves Chronic Lower Back Pain, Study Suggests" [www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/163144.php](http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/163144.php)
- Graham s "Psychological Stress Better Predictor of Back Pain Than Standard Diagnostic Techniques": Scientific American May 17, 2004
- Managing acute low back pain  
[www.nps.org.au/news\\_and\\_media/media\\_releases/repository/Managing\\_acute\\_low\\_back\\_pain](http://www.nps.org.au/news_and_media/media_releases/repository/Managing_acute_low_back_pain)
- Lewis D "About Pain" [www.pathways2wellbeing.com.au](http://www.pathways2wellbeing.com.au)