

Don't Share Your Pain



Pain circuits are permanent and are at the core of your unconscious brain. There is nothing you can do to “fix” the pain response, nor would you want to. Pain signals danger and keeps you safe. But any attention paid to these circuits simply reinforces them, including when you try to ignore them. The key is to calm down and shift your nervous system on to more enjoyable regions of your brain. There are strategies that stimulate the brain to change its structure. The changes include growing new nerve cells, increasing the number of connections between the neurons, and increasing the amount of myelin, which speeds up nerve conduction. A critical aspect of stimulating neuroplasticity is where you direct your attention. It is where your brain will develop.

Reinforcing pathways

One behavior that reinforces your pain experience is discussing it. Most people, when they are in pain, naturally want to share their story with anyone and everyone who will listen. However, when you place your attention on these unpleasant circuits you are spending less time on enjoyable and creative experiences.

Another problem is that patients understandably, but endlessly search for a cure. Why wouldn't a person seek a remedy for the distress, anxiety, and discomfort they are feeling? Pain consumes lives, but when you let your pain run the show, you're focusing on the problem. The solution lies in moving forward, away from the pain.



Social isolation

Another common occurrence of those who suffer from chronic pain is that people become socially isolated. This can happen because pain makes it hard to socialize, and also complaining drives others away. Once a person becomes socially isolated, they now have more time to ruminate on their pain. Additionally, being alone is a painful experience. Several studies have demonstrated that people who are socially isolated and those in chronic pain have the same parts of their brains activated. (1)

Shared suffering

Conversely, for every patient that is not socially isolated, I see patients who are only connecting to others through their common bond of pain and suffering. While these connections are intimate and revealing, -complaining is not a great way to create rich and fulfilling relationships. People caught in this negative feedback loop will inadvertently keep one another in a pain cycle.

In fact, several research papers have documented that belonging to a fibromyalgia support group or diligently keeping a pain diary is a predictor of a poor prognosis for healing. These formats are thought to reinforce your suffering, as well as the suffering of others in the group. (2)

Just Stop

I routinely tell my patients that the first rule of solving chronic pain is not discussing it with anyone, other than their health care providers. This is *especially* true for close family and friends.

Additionally, as I realized that mental pain is a greater problem than physical pain, I added on:

- No complaining
- No giving unasked advice – especially to your partner or children
- No criticism
- No gossip

The solution for your pain lies in stimulating your brain to change. What direction do you want it to go?

1. Eisenberger N, et al. “Does rejection hurt? An fMRI study of social exclusion.” *Science* (2003); 290.
2. Ferrari R and Deon Louw. “Effect of a pain diary use on recovery from acute whiplash injury: a cohort study.” *Biomed & Biotechnol* (2013); 14: 1049-1053.