

Understanding and managing your pain

Living with pain can be one of the hardest parts of having osteoarthritis. Pain is actually a lot more complex than most of us realize. Sensations from your joint are processed in your brain and those pain messages are influenced by all sorts of other messages in the brain before they become the awareness of pain that you experience.

There are two important factors that influence your pain experience:

1. The first is related to the amount and type of sensations coming into your brain. The pathway to your brain is like a motorway that can only take a limited amount of traffic. The motorway gives preference to certain sensations over others. 'Normal' sensations for movement, touch and warmth are given preference over pain sensations. The more 'normal' sensations that come from your joint, the less pain sensations that get through to your brain and therefore your awareness. That is why pain can feel worse when there is not much else going on, and better a few minutes after you start walking. That is also why we sometimes rub our joint to make it feel better, and the main reason why a heat pad provides relief.
2. The second factor relates to how your brain amplifies pain sensations. It's like there is a volume control knob in your brain and things like your mood, stress levels or other thoughts can turn the volume of incoming pain messages up or down. For example, it is well known that stress, anxiety, depression, fatigue and negative thoughts can all turn the pain volume up. Thus, relaxation techniques and dealing with depression and negative thoughts can really make a difference to the level of pain you feel. Thinking about other things, or distraction techniques, can also help turn the pain volume down. These techniques require practice for them to work well and can be hard to learn on your own, but you might feel some benefit from trying out some simple distraction, such as thinking of pleasant experiences when the pain gets bad, or reducing tension with relaxation.

If you live with chronic or persistent pain, you're not alone. It's a common and complicated problem that affects 1 in 5 Australians.

The good news is that there are many things you can do to help manage your pain. It's a good idea to try a few different things so that you have a choice of different strategies and tools that you can call on when needed. This will give you more control over your pain.

It used to be thought that pain was just a simple message from your body straight to the brain. However, lots of research has shown that pain is much more complex than that, and that the brain can change how we interpret messages of pain. So, if we are feeling stressed, for example, we know that this can often affect our blood pressure or our gut, and we now know that it can also impact our feelings of pain. So, pain, like other things happening in our body, can often feel worse when we are stressed or anxious. Many people notice that their thoughts and feelings can have a major effect on their pain.

