

# Managing your thoughts, emotions and behaviours

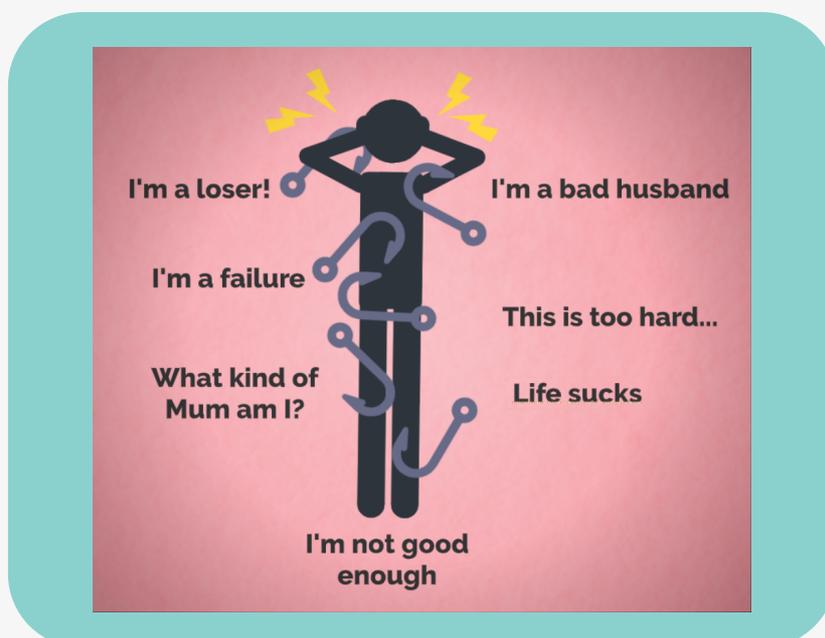
When life is going our way and things are good, it's pretty easy to choose to do activities that make our lives richer; that gives it meaning and that makes it easier for us to behave like the person we want to be.



However, when things are tough – for instance, if you are living with persistent pain – then you may encounter lots of difficulties throughout your day and experience a range of unpleasant emotions such as anger, anxiety, or hopelessness. It is very easy to become hooked by intense thoughts which drag you down a path you don't want to go.

These hooks can lead to behaviour that is unlike the kind of person you want to be and take you away from the life you want, leading to doing things that tend to make your suffering worse.

For instance, you may feel angry, and think about how unfair it is that you are in pain when others aren't, so you take it out on your loved ones when you know it isn't their fault. Or you may feel guilty when you see yourself as not able to cope so you don't ask for help when you need it. Or maybe, you avoid moving because you are afraid you may cause more damage to yourself but end up stiff and out of shape which makes the pain worse. Unfortunately, it's really easy to become hooked up in this way of thinking and feeling.





In this booklet we are going to introduce you to some strategies to help you 'unhook' yourself from these unhelpful emotions, thoughts and patterns of behaviour. These suggestions may not take your pain away, but they can help you down a path that leads to the kind of life you want to have and to be the kind of person you want to be.

As well as moving more, activities like mindful awareness of thoughts, relaxation, diaphragmatic breathing, and socialising have an amazing power to reduce stress, lower blood pressure and decrease pain.

This might sound like a bit 'airy fairy' but there is good evidence to show that these techniques are effective in bringing pain levels down and reducing the need for painkillers. This is your body's way of producing its own painkillers, allowing you to move forward, but these habits take practise.



So, how can you do this?

**Step one:** become aware of thoughts and feelings with mindfulness.

**Step two:** Unhook and step back, relax and slow down your breathing

**Step three:** notice if your thoughts are helping you move towards what matters

**Step four:** Connect with others and yourself.

## Thinking about thinking

It's part of human nature to get 'stuck in our thoughts' from time to time, particularly if you have persistent pain. It is very easy to become fixated on pain and lose sight of everything else around you. At other times you may get into a struggle, trying to fight or push away thoughts about pain. Whilst this is understandable, we know that being hooked up in these thoughts and feelings can make your pain and suffering worse.

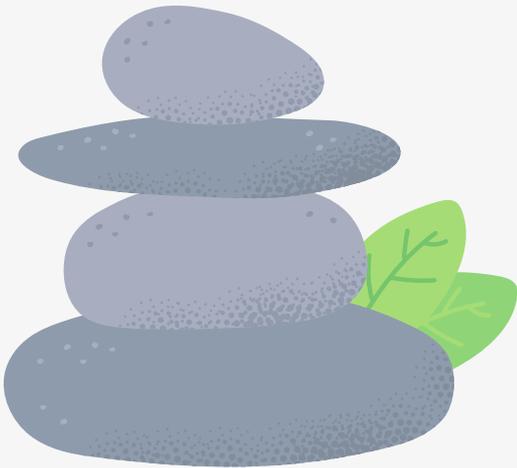
People can start to see the pain as their identity, rather than only a part of who they are. They look 'from' their thoughts, rather than 'at' them.

The more aware a person is of the thoughts and emotions they have about their pain, the more they can step in early to lessen the impact that being hooked up can have on their emotional and mental wellbeing.

## Mindfulness

*What is mindfulness?*

Mindfulness can be defined as "moment-to-moment, non-judgemental awareness" (Jon Kabat-Zinn).



For someone in pain, mindfulness may be helpful in paying attention, on purpose, to their experiences of bodily sensations, thoughts, and feelings.

This means recognising the way the pain can lead to distress in a kindly, curious, non-judgmental way, making room for compassion for yourself. This is not an easy thing to do and it takes courage and practice.

Some liken it to watching thoughts as clouds drifting past. It is not about ignoring your thoughts and feelings, or bottling them up, but about acknowledging that they are there and then allowing them to pass. Mindfulness is also about returning to the present moment when you notice you are becoming overwhelmed with anxious thoughts about the future, or upsetting thoughts about what's gone before.

When you have hopped on a cloud and it's taken you with it, mindfulness brings your attention back to the here and now. In this way, it helps you to notice thoughts and emotions and offer a moment of pause instead of an immediate reaction.

That awareness can allow us to choose to step away from thoughts going round and around in our heads to no benefit.

"I didn't realise how angry and tense I was!" Mindfulness can help you have the time to choose steps to feel calmer and less stressed.

This link to 'Breathworks' YouTube video, gives a good example of how mindfulness helped her cope with long term pain. <https://youtu.be/iSGsTWcofhM>

Ref: [mind.org.uk/information-support/drugs-and-treatments/mindfulness/about-mindfulness/](https://mind.org.uk/information-support/drugs-and-treatments/mindfulness/about-mindfulness/)

There are different ways to practise mindfulness. Often it helps to have a particular anchor in the present to bring your attention to, like your breathing, or sounds. For people who find it difficult to sit or lie, mindful movement in the form of Tai Chi or Yoga might be the answer. You can even bring mindful awareness to everyday tasks like washing the dishes, or eating food or walking in nature.

There's no correct way to do mindfulness. You are not supposed to clear your mind, or be calm and Zen. All you are supposed to do is notice and allow what is your experience right now, be it pleasant or unpleasant, and bring a kindly curiosity to that, without trying to fix or change it, hold on to it, or push it away.

### Mindfulness of the breath

Breathing is an automatic process that, for the most part, we pay no attention to. Being mindful of your breath can help anchor you to the here and now.

Observing your breath may give you clues that your thoughts are hooking you and emotions are getting stronger.



## **This brings us to Step two: unhook and step back, relax and slow your breathing**

Once you are aware of thoughts, feelings and sensations, you can unhook from them and make some choices.

Bringing down your tension and stress levels may be the most effective thing to do at that moment. Literally 'take a breather'.

### **Slow or Diaphragmatic breathing**



How often have you held your breath before you make a movement for fear of making your pain worse? Or have you ever noticed that your breath becomes more rapid when you are undertaking a painful movement or even thinking about doing it?

When breathing becomes fast and shallow this is often related to a 'stress response' in the body. This response results in adrenaline and cortisol being released. These 'stress' hormones are useful if you want to run away from a tiger, because it raises the body's blood pressure and increases the heart rate, preparing you to fight or run away. However, if the levels of stress hormones remain high (because you are angry, anxious, overwhelmed or in pain) this can have a powerful effect on your physical and mental state. High levels of cortisol and adrenaline over a long period can lead to tiredness, headaches, poor sleep, anxiety, depression, weight gain and a lowered immune system.

The good news is that noticing and then slowing your breathing can reverse the effects of the stress hormones. . By breathing more slowly, using your diaphragm, your 'stress response' is switched off and the mind and body can become calmer and more balanced...

## Techniques for Practicing Diaphragmatic Breathing

- + Find a position you are relaxed and comfortable in – this could be sitting, lying, or leaning up against a wall for instance. Place the palm of one hand on your abdomen, and the palm of your other on your stomach.
- + It doesn't really matter whether you breathe through your mouth or nose. Whatever feels most natural for you.
- + Take air in slowly, softening your abdomen and directing the air to the bottom of your lungs. The aim isn't to take in lots of air, just the same amount as usual, but spread out more slowly and reaching more of your lungs, by letting your stomach rise and fall.
- + To make it easier, you could imagine that you have a balloon in your stomach and each time you breath in, the balloon inflates, and your stomach rises. Then, each time you breathe out, the balloon deflates and your stomach falls.
- + Spread out the breath by counting 'one, elephant, two, elephant' etc as you take in air and as you breathe out. Find a rhythm which is slow but that you are comfortable with and feels best for you.
- + Aim to count between 3 and 5 elephants, with a pause in between, and work up from five to twenty breaths in a row as you develop the skill.
- + Light-headedness may mean you are taking in too much air. In that case, spread your breath out, rather than increase the amount of breath.

## Relaxation

Relaxation is a helpful next choice to make for a few good reasons.



- Persistent pain stores up tension in muscles, which can add another source of pain and spasm.
- Levels of stress hormones are directly linked to muscular tension and faster breathing. Slowing the breath and reducing the tension will reduce the flow of these chemicals.
- Relaxation can calm blood pressure, and promote more refreshing rest and sleep.
- All of these changes will improve the ability to think more widely, and consider possibilities rather than focus on problems.
- Muscles build during recovery, so letting go of background tension will promote strength and healing.

For people living with persistent pain, tension can be so habitual that they no longer notice it. The muscles need to be 'retrained' to know the difference between tense and relaxed once again. So the best kinds of relaxation routines are 'systematic' meaning they work their way through all of the muscle groups in turn. Two options are detailed below:

### Progressive Muscular Relaxation

Often with a jammed handbrake, you may need to pull it on further before it will release. The same can go for chronically tense muscles. Add a little extra tension in each movement. Don't overdo it.

Do each movement, hold briefly then let the tension go and notice the difference. Repeat and again notice the difference before moving on to the next area.

**Foot** - curl your toes downward

**Lower leg and foot** - tighten your calf muscle by pulling toes towards you

**Entire leg** - squeeze thigh muscles while doing above (Repeat on other side of body)

**Hand** - clench your fist

**Entire right arm** - tighten your biceps by drawing your forearm up towards your shoulder and "make a muscle", while clenching fist. (Repeat on other side of body)

**Buttocks** - tighten by pulling your buttocks together

**Stomach** - suck your stomach in

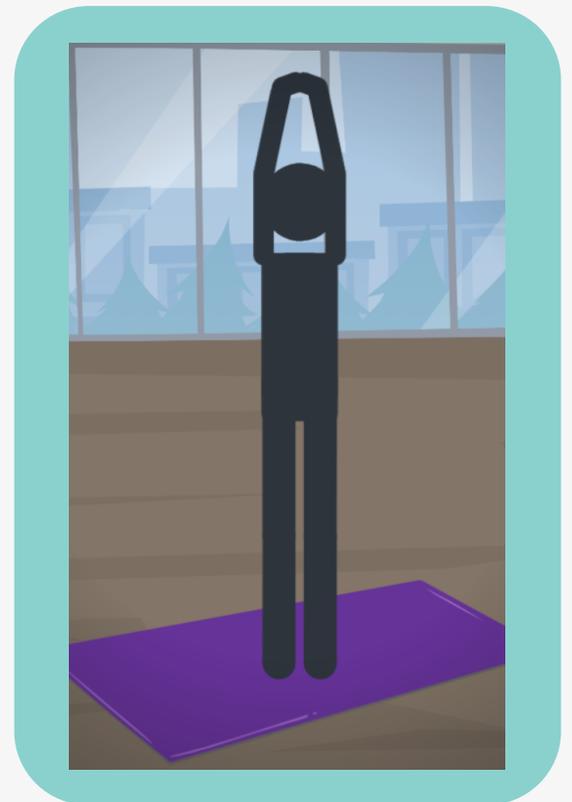
**Chest** - tighten by taking a deep breath

**Neck and shoulders** - raise your shoulders up to touch your ears

**Mouth** - open your mouth wide enough to stretch the hinges of your jaw

**Eyes** - clench your eyelids tightly shut

**Forehead** - raise your eyebrows as far as you can



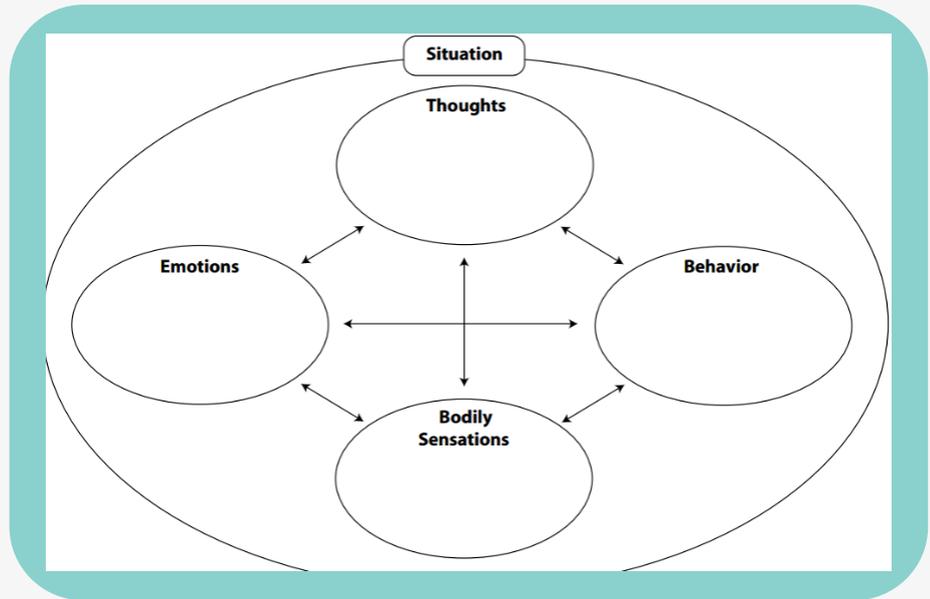
Reminder: **gently** tense and then let go of each of these areas in turn. Repeat, notice the difference between tense and let go, and then move on to the next body area. Don't forget to breathe.

### Autogenic Relaxation

Pay attention each muscle group as above. Instead of tensing and relaxing, imagine your breath filling the muscles with warmth and heaviness, for a few breaths before moving on to the next area.

### Seeing the Wood through the Trees

It can be hard to see how your emotions might be affecting your pain levels and behaviour. This is why it can be helpful to write things down. Using these skills to help you see how your thoughts can affect how you feel, try filling this diagram based on what you have noticed.



It may help you to begin to understand how your thoughts and feelings are making you behave in a certain way. By identifying patterns in this way, it can help you decide if your behaviour is helping you manage your pain or if there might be a better way to deal with things.

### Connections and Social Bonding

When we socialise with friends and families 'happy hormones': (oxytocin) are released in the body which can lift your moods and make you feel more warm and positive about things. As a result, you become more motivated to do things which releases more 'happy hormones: dopamine and serotonin. These hormones can also make the nerves less sensitive to pain signals and, as a result, lower your pain levels.

As well as having a good connection to others, it pays to begin to make a more compassionate relationship with yourself. Sometimes having persistent pain can interfere with your ability to have faith in your body's signals.

You can end up struggling with or disconnecting from yourself. Using mindfulness and stress reduction can open the channels of communication between mind and body again in a more helpful way, freeing you up to move towards the future even if you have to take your pain along with you.



Use these skills to help you become more aware of the way your emotions, thoughts and pain affect each other. The more aware you are, the more you can choose the next steps. Your world becomes less driven by pain, and more about what matters to you.

**Be kind to yourself. If you wouldn't say it to your best friend, don't say it to yourself.**

