How Pain Thoughts Can Affect You

Key Learnings

- **The brain has 'old' and 'new' parts.** The older brain handles survival and emotions, while the newer brain manages reasoning, planning, and self-awareness. These systems can clash, especially when thoughts trigger stress responses.
- **The brain's primary job is protection.** It constantly scans your body and environment to detect potential threats and trigger protective responses—even if the threat isn't real.
- **Thinking traps distort reality**—they're automatic, biased patterns that can worsen mood, increase avoidance, and make pain feel more overwhelming.
- **Recognising and challenging thinking traps**—like mind reading, catastrophising, or rigid "should" statements—can help you respond to pain more flexibly and compassionately.
- **Thoughts shape how we feel and act.** They can influence our mood, behaviour, and even physical responses in the body.
- **Not all thoughts are helpful.** Some arise automatically—especially in response to pain—and may lead to rumination, fear, or self-blame.
- **The brain focuses on threat-related thoughts.** This "better safe than sorry" principle helps us survive but can amplify distress in chronic pain.
- **Pain generates a stream of thoughts.** Acute pain often leads to problem-solving thoughts, while chronic pain may trigger repetitive, less helpful ones.

Skills to Practise

- **Notice when your brain is on high alert.** What triggered it? Was it a real threat or a thought?
- **Challenge automatic thoughts** that may be triggering stress or pain responses.
- **Reflect on past experiences** that may be shaping your brain's current reactions.
- **Practice self-compassion**—your brain is trying to protect you, even when it gets it wrong.
- **Notice your thoughts**—especially those that arise during pain.
- **Label helpful vs. unhelpful thoughts**—ask: "Is this thought helping me take useful action?"
- **Interrupt rumination**—use grounding techniques like breathing or distraction.
- **Challenge repetitive thoughts**—especially those rooted in self-blame or fear.

- **Practice self-compassion**—your brain is trying to protect you, even when it gets stuck.

? Quiz Questions

Question 1: What is considered the brain's most important job?

A. Managing emotions
B. Protecting you from harm
C. Controlling movement
D. Generating thoughts

Explanation: The brain's primary role is to keep you safe by detecting threats and initiating protective responses. **Answer:** B

Question 2: Which part of the brain is responsible for reasoning, planning, and self-awareness?

A. Reptilian brain
B. Limbic system
C. Neocortex
D. Brainstem

Explanation: The neocortex, or "thinking brain," handles complex tasks like reasoning and planning. **Answer:** C

Question 3: Why might the brain's "better safe than sorry" approach be unhelpful in chronic pain?

A. It slows down decision-making
B. It treats pain as a threat, triggering unnecessary stress responses
C. It ignores real threats
D. It prevents emotional reactions

Explanation: The brain may misinterpret pain as danger, leading to repeated stress responses that worsen the experience. **Answer:** B

Question 4: Which of the following is an example of "All or Nothing" thinking?

A. "If I can't do a full gym class like I used to, then there's no point in exercising at all."
B. "My partner thinks I'm making up the pain because there are no visible signs."
C. "This pain is never going to get better."
D. "I should be able to do everything I used to do before the pain started."

Explanation: All or Nothing thinking sees situations in extremes, without middle ground. **Answer:** A

Question 5: Why are thinking traps problematic in chronic pain management?

A. They help you push through pain no matter what

B. They encourage balanced decision-making
C. They can distort reality, increase avoidance, and worsen mood
D. They make pain disappear faster

Explanation: Thinking traps can lead to unhelpful behaviors and emotional distress by reinforcing negative beliefs and avoidance. **Answer:** C

Question 6: Why does the brain tend to focus more on fear-related thoughts?

A. Because fear is more interesting
B. Because it helps us feel happy
C. Because it wants us to remember everything
D. Because it's hardwired to prioritise safety

Explanation: The brain follows a "better safe than sorry" principle, focusing on potential threats to keep us safe. **Answer:** D

Question 7: What is rumination?

A. A helpful way to solve problems
B. Repetitive dwelling on thoughts, often negative or self-blaming
C. A type of breathing exercise
D. A way to distract yourself from pain

Explanation: Rumination involves repetitive, unhelpful thinking that can worsen mood and increase distress. **Answer:** B