

## Tiger in the Room



Let us imagine for a moment that there is a tiger sitting in the corner of the room... for most, this is a pretty frightening thought!

All living creatures, including humans, are designed to respond to threats like a 'tiger in the room' by preparing the body to fight, flight or freeze. It is not just our body that is involved in this way of responding – our brains go into high alert too.

Most of us would find it difficult to function and would quite possibly be unable to do anything else until we've done something to deal with the tiger in the room. Typical responses include either fighting the tiger off, running away from it or freezing, in the hope that we would go unnoticed. **We use the term "stress response" as a shorthand to summarise the body's defensive responses which include fighting, fighting or freezing in response to threats.**

Having a tiger close by is scary, stressful and exhausting. In such a scenario, life is on hold, as if there is no time for other things, but survival in the moment!

**That same stress response is triggered by any type of threat, including pain.** Acute pain is like the tiger, demanding of our attention. Hopefully, if we address the pain and the tissue heals, the will go away and the stress response will too.

But what if it doesn't, like in the case of chronic pain. Chronic pain is the type of pain that may well 'hang around' for a while and the same fight/flight/freeze response is activated every time the pain ramps up. Like a roar of the tiger – a reminder of a threat to your body.

### **But is the tiger really a threat?**

The reason we are frightened by the tiger in the room is because they can be very dangerous! If they are alive, hungry or protective, that is. But there are lots of other 'tigers' that don't have all of these characteristics. Tigers come in many forms, they may be striped, they may have a tail and a growly face, but when examined close-up, they could also be fluffy, they may not have real teeth and claws... They could in fact be tiger toys. We may have some of these types of tigers in our homes without leading to or initiating a fight/flight/freeze response. This tells us that our brains can adapt to threat information.

### **How does this all relate to chronic pain?**

Just like checking out the tiger – is it alive or not – you have checked out for serious threats within your body. You will have had investigations to exclude things like infections, broken bones, cancerous cells or other serious abnormalities.

**Now the challenge is to trust this information and know that your body is not in as much danger as pain makes it feel.** Once you can accept this, you can reframe what your pain means. As with the tiger, your brain will need regular assurances that you are not under threat. You will perhaps need reminding that you are not causing harm to your body – not by living your life.

If you can reframe your chronic pain in a similar way to the tiger, you can reduce the stress response. By recognising that there is no threat to your body, you can reduce the amount of time your body and brain is in 'fight, flight, freeze' mode and potentially free up more energy and time to focus on other things in your life that are important to you. This is not an easy task, but having an interpretation of your pain that accepts it is here, real and unpleasant, but does not reflect the threat it seems to represent, is a key strategy to help you become in charge and better manage your pain. It will likely also include you noticing bodily changes with pain, implementing strategies to manage these changes and reappraising the threat in your body and environment.