7 Surprisingly Simple Steps to Living with Less Pain

Photo: Shawn Green, LaVerkin Utah

We all adapt…

A ponderosa pine finds a way to make the best of a challenging location in Zion National Park

Our ability to adapt and heal is far greater than we think.

7 Surprisingly Simple Steps to Live with Less Pain

1. BE AWARE THAT CHANGE IS POSSIBLE

All pain is created by the brain. Because the brain is neuroplastic (always changing), this means that **chronic pain is reversible**. Each time you remember this, your brain will feel safer and will create less pain.

2. USE SYMPTOMS AS A REMINDER TO PRACTICE

The brain unconsciously attaches negative emotions to unpleasant sensations. Since negative emotions strengthen learning even more than positive ones, this unconscious process has the potential to strengthen the very symptoms you don't want. To change this, use each awareness of pain as a reminder to embark on a new, rewarding activity. Repetition will break the unconscious conditioning that sustains your pain.

3. CALM YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

Neuroplasticity is more effective when the nervous system is regulated. Under stress, we tend to revert to autopilot; that is, we don't have the capacity to think creatively. So, as often as possible, use box breathing, self-hypnosis, yoga nidra, and other evidence-based strategies to calm the nervous system so that your neuroplastic practice is most effective.

4. PRACTICE WITH YOUR IMAGINATION

Take time to figure out how you want your life to change. What experiences would you like to have more of? For the best chances of success, your goal should be something important to you, something worth working for, something that will maintain your motivation and sense of purpose. e.g., imagining a body part moving with comfort and ease, an interpersonal interaction progressing successfully toward a desired outcome, or a task successfully completed.

5. TAKE BABY STEPS

Even if you are doing the first four steps regularly, your real life won't change unless you start doing some of the things you want to get back into your life. Often people feel overwhelmed by the giant chasm between their current abilities and where they would like them to be. This gap can be so huge that people feel it's impossible and give up. To get your life back, start setting small challenges for yourself using some of your goals from Step 4. The best challenges are right on the edge of your capacity: hard enough that it takes focused attention but not so difficult to be demoralizing.

6. PRACTICE ONE HOUR DAILY

There is a consensus among neuroplasticity coaches that brain remodeling (learning) requires one hour a day of practice. The practice does not have to be one hour at a time; in fact, breaking it up throughout the day may be more powerful. And small chunks will help you pace your energy. Practice includes anything you do that is different from your current habits. A few examples include calming, elevating mood, imagining your future successes, doing creative activities, connecting with loved ones, being grateful, maintaining hope, and so much more.

7. REST OR SLEEP AFTER PRACTICE

Reward yourself with a break. Put your feet up, close your eyes, and feel your body relax. Try listening to a self-hypnosis or a yoga nidra script to restore yourself and consolidate your work. If you fall asleep (and this doesn't ruin your night-time sleep), all the better. Sleep hardwires your practice, and you will restart your day more refreshed.

These 7 steps are the first steps you can take to begin to rewire your brain and regain your life. I invite you to print the previous page and put it in places that will remind you of the practical steps you can take on daily basis.

If you want to learn more, I have developed an all-in-one online self-study course *Healing Through Neuroplasticity: Pathways to Pain-Free Living* in which you will be guided step by step to customize your pathway to improvement—a pathway that addresses your unique symptoms and uses strategies that you choose. If you have tried everything including drugs, injections, devices, manual treatments, CBT, exercise, and more, this course is for you.

GET THE COURSE

If you'd like to understand what makes me so optimistic and how you can use neuroplasticity practices in your life, read on.

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What Have I Learned from My Own Illness and Recovery?

In 1989, I became ill with Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS), fibromyalgia, multiple chemical sensitivities, and several comorbidities. In September 2017, I had a breakthrough. You'll learn more about my story in the next email that you'll receive from me, but here's a summary of what I've learned.

Chronic pain is a biomedical condition caused by measurable changes in the structure and function of the central nervous system. The changes are caused by neuroplasticity—the brain's constant remodeling to adapt to circumstances and environment. Although impacted by the mind, persistent pain is not a psychological or psychosomatic condition.

Healing occurs through the intentional, repeated application of neuroplasticity-based tools to reverse the changes that caused the persistent pain to develop in the first place. Once you understand how to change your life (thoughts, feelings, and behaviors) on a consistent basis, your brain will get the message that pain is no longer necessary and your pain will lessen, sometimes disappear entirely.

With neuroplasticity-based practice, **you'll learn to reverse the underlying cause of your pain** and return your biology to its essential, protective function.

What Makes Me so Optimistic?

My optimism is based on my lived experience and that of thousands of patients I've worked with over the past 22 years. It took me 27 years to substantially recover from my severe daily symptoms. There was a lot of trial and error and a lot of false leads. I want to try to help you learn how to improve your chronic pain much more quickly that I did.

If there's one thing I'd like you to take away from what I'll be offering you, it's hope. Hope is a powerful thing. Hope can give you the strength to keep going when you feel like you can't. Hope can help you to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Hope can change your entire outlook on life.

If you are struggling with chronic pain and other debilitating symptoms, it is important to remember that there is always hope. Hope that you will get better. Hope that you will find a way to manage your disease. Hope that you will one day be able to live a full and healthy life again.

What Does Neuroplasticity Have to Do with Chronic Pain?

In my third email to you, you'll learn more about the connection between neuroplasticity and chronic pain. For now, I offer a brief and simple explanation:

Neuroplasticity literally means that we can rewire the brain and change the physical structure of the brain, resulting in changes in function and behavior.

Understanding neuroplasticity led me to hypothesize that perhaps we could rewire the brain in a way that leads to significantly less pain and, in some people, causes the pain to completely resolve.

Although the scientific rationale for using neuroplastic strategies is strong, research on neuroplasticity-based interventions is in its infancy. If I hadn't experienced significant changes myself and observed it in a growing number of patients, I wouldn't have believed it could be so effective. By adding neuroplasticity-based strategies to their repertoire, more people in my practice have made larger improvements in health and function than with lifestyle modification alone. These changes have been reported in people, regardless of age and irrespective of the duration or severity of their symptoms. This means that most people with chronic pain and related symptoms can improve if they have the information they need and the motivation to take charge of their health.

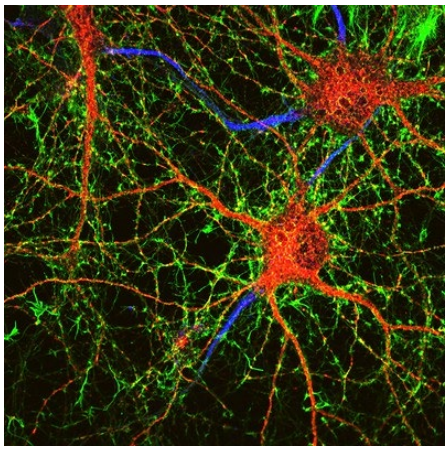
If you do, you may find the online course I created called *Healing Through Neuroplasticity: Pathways to Pain-Free Living* just for you.

Neuroplasticity is neutral.

It can make health better or worse.

The Science Behind the 7 Steps: What is Neuroplasticity?

People think of neuroplasticity as being an almost magical force for good. However, neuroplasticity is neutral. It can make our health better or worse. It contributes to the development of many chronic conditions, including chronic pain, and enables recovery from chronic conditions and injuries.



Neuronal Connections: Each green dot is a synapse—connection between neurons. Photo: Flickr Creative Commons

Neuroplasticity refers to change—the direction of change is, in part, up to us.

In another email that you'll soon receive from me, I'll explain how if you consistently and thoughtfully implement strategies that are right for you, improvements in health are not only possible, but probable.

I'll also explain the first and second laws of neuroplasticity, both of which will support you in you as you take charge of your health.

Two Types of Neuroplasticity Practice

SCHEDULED PRACTICE

PRACTICE DAILY, REGARDLESS OF WHEN YOU GET SYMPTOMS

Recommended, scheduled practices are intended to calm the autonomic nervous system to make your spontaneous practice more effective. They include meditation, paced breathing, yoga, or tai chi.

Best done at the same time every day, ideally early in the morning to get your day off to a good start or in the evening to calm your nervous system before bed.

The more you practice becoming calm in the present moment, the more easily you will be able to become calm when you most want and need to.

Try different strategies to notice which work best for you. You can use a tracker to see if you are able to bring your heart rate down (a sign of calm). The goal is to become good enough at the practice so that when you are upset or preoccupied, you have a reliable tool to use.

SPONTANEOUS PRACTICE

PRACTICE WHEN SYMPTOMS OCCUR

Recommended each time you become aware of a symptom or reaction you're trying to change. This is how you change your brain.

Best done throughout the day whenever and as often as is necessary. The goal of neuroplasticity practice is to break the connection between a symptom and your body's habitual response.

For example, if you want to decrease pain, have a list of strategies you can do each time you become aware of pain.

This is called **Active Redirection**. Each time you become aware of a symptom, change the focus of your attention from the distress to something that is fun, meaningful, or creative.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES

Examples include painting a picture; knitting a sweater with a difficult pattern you haven't used before; practicing a new physical skill, especially one that requires balance or coordination; or doing something kind or helpful for someone else.

IMAGINED ACTIVITIES

Imagined activities can be used in lieu of real-life actions. They activate neuronal pathways almost as much as real experience! For people who are moderately to severely ill, imagination offers a way to start the process of change.

Change your focus and behavior to something that takes your full attention—

something fun, meaningful, or creative.

Why Does Active Redirection Work So Well?

Each neuron is part of multiple circuits in the brain. However, **a neuron can only do one thing at a time.** After firing, a neuron enters a period of latency while its electric charge is re-established.

If you fire many neurons doing something enjoyable, calming, meaningful, active, or creative, your brain is too busy to do something contrary to this at the same time, such as being stressed or scared. At the level of the neuron, multitasking is not possible.

Examples of Active Redirection

Thoughts:

"This symptom is being caused by my brain trying to protect me, not by my body—I am safe."

"My body is healthy and is able to manage this routine movement."

"Motion is lotion—this is safe for me."

Emotions/Sensations:

Notice one thing in this moment that makes you feel good (happy, calm, grateful) and focus on it for at least 15 seconds.

Notice one part of your body that is comfortable.

Remember a past experience in which you felt good (loved, joyous, peaceful).

Actions:

Focus your attention on something real or in your imagination that is interesting, meaningful, or mood elevating (e.g., a favorite comedian, funny cat videos, beautiful art).

Call or visit a friend who is uplifting and validating.

Go outside and experience nature (even if it is a small patch of grass and one tree).

If you imagine your desired outcome is occurring now,

your body will produce the neurochemicals and hormones associated with the hoped-for experience.

Take Home Message

For people living with chronic pain, the path forward is not a one-size-fits-all approach. You have unique symptoms, and the strategies that you choose to address them will, therefore, be unique to you and your symptoms.

In *Healing Through Neuroplasticity: Pathways to Pain-Free Living,* you'll receive step-by-step guidance to help you customize your pathway to improvement.

If you have tried everything including drugs, injections, devices, manual treatments, CBT, exercise, and more, this course is for you!

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