



Hopping Off the Pain Merry-go-round

Accepting pain doesn't mean accepting defeat, says our patient advocate. Rather, pain acceptance is a mindset shift.

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Get off the pain merry-go-round with a mindset shift [istock/bmcent1](#)

For many people, the struggle with chronic non-malignant pain can be as bad as—or even worse than—the pain itself. The struggle makes it easy to become preoccupied with pain, worry about the pain, feel the need to avoid or control the pain, become distressed by the symptoms,

and feel like a victim. The struggle can lead to [anxiety, depression, disability, and even more pain](#).

To minimize the struggle, it's helpful to come to terms with the pain as your "new normal" – making room for it, managing it, and living life regardless of the pain, knowing the pain doesn't mean harm to you. This process is called pain acceptance, "the process of giving up the struggle with pain and learning to live life despite pain" as defined by the authors of a [2008 study in the journal *Pain Research and Management*](#) .

Pain Is Inevitable, But Suffering Is Optional

Pain is a part of the human condition. Acute pain, at least, is often a vital biologic response to some trauma. It's your body saying, "Hey, there's a real problem here."

Everyone experiences pain, but it doesn't mean we have to suffer. Take eating a jalapeno for example. We enjoy the pain of the hot pepper because we enjoy the taste of the pepper, but we don't suffer; If we did, we'd probably skip the jalapeños.

Suffering, on the other hand, is the tension and negative experience built around the pain. It's the struggle with pain. It's our response, and it's within our control.

The Pain Merry-go-round

No one likes pain and we'll do almost anything to find the cause and a solution. The problem is that quest for relief can become all-consuming, and we end up spending more time and mental bandwidth on the pain, depleting ourselves, having no energy left over for enjoyable and sometimes even necessary activities.

It's easy to jump on what I call the pain merry-go-round – visiting all types of healthcare providers, going through all sorts of tests, taking pills, getting injections, and even having surgery. While some of these might help, some may not, and some may even make things worse. Meanwhile, they all cost money, divert time from other fulfilling life activities, and delay chronic pain rehabilitation.

Pain Doesn't Always Mean Harm

Once acute pain becomes chronic, pain often loses its warning function and becomes its own disease/condition. It's no longer an indicator of damage. The chronicity changes how the brain

and central nervous system processes pain – misfiring nerve signals and continuing to tell the body it hurts.

By being able to tell the difference between new acute pain and chronic pain, you can change how you react to chronic pain by not being so guarded or worried about it – reacting with feelings of calm and safety instead of fear and danger.

A Sense of Relief

There's a sense of relief when we stop fighting the pain, accept the pain, and do the things we want to do, despite the pain – no longer going through the emotional and financial costs associated with more doctors, more testing, more medication, and more procedures.

Medical research has shown acceptance is associated with less pain-related fear, less emotional distress like anxiety and depression, less physical disability, and less pain.

Accepting pain doesn't mean:

- Being okay with the pain
- Giving up hope of improvement or being pain-free someday
- Resigning yourself to a life of misery

Instead, accepting pain is about grieving your losses, moving forward, finding joy, participating in valuable activities, achieving goals, and leading a fulfilling and functional life, despite the pain and the need to change it.

It's okay to have feelings of frustration and anger at times, we're human. The important thing is to not let those feelings monopolize our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors.

Taking Control

Accepting the pain and taking personal responsibility for self-management of it is a good thing. While we might not be able to completely stop the pain, we can at least take control of our lives.

Imagine being in a car with your chronic pain. Where is the pain? Is pain behind the steering wheel - determining where you go and what you do? Or are you driving? It's possible to change your pain experience by taking away the amount of control the pain may have over you.

Accepting chronic pain is not just another coping tool. It's a change in thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. It requires a change in attitude. It requires active work on your part as a patient. And it requires engaging in normal activities, despite the pain. It's not something someone does to you.

But how do you do it? How do you accept pain?

That's the million-dollar question and unique to each of us.

Accepting my own personal chronic pain was a process that involved:

- Learning that pain is more than issues with tissues, but rather a complex entity with a variety of biological psychological, and social factors (aka the [biopsychosocial model](#))
- Recognizing I'm not broken and need fixing
- Understanding the pain doesn't mean harm to me
- Realizing there isn't an immediate cure – I tried all types of treatment, yet, I still had pain
- Developing a willingness to look at things as they are without emotional attachment – it is what it is
- Acknowledging the pain and allowing it to happen without judging it
- Learning how I can control pain by controlling my thoughts, feelings, and actions
- Realizing I'm the best person to rely on for help with my pain
- Learning how to use self-management tools to help put the pain in the background and calm my pain alarm system
- Having support from my family, friends, and healthcare team

James D. Hudson, MD, the medical director of Mary Free Bed Pain Rehabilitation Program in Grand Rapids, Mich., compared learning to living with pain like learning to live next to the noisy El train system in Chicago. The sound becomes less troublesome as you make room for it and adapt to it.

Bottom line? It's possible to turn down the pain dial and reduce our suffering by accepting our pain.

Tom Bowen is a member of the PPM Patient Editorial Advisory Board as a patient advocate, and the author of the free e-book [Chronic Pain Won't Stop Me](#).

REFERENCES



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Mr. Bowen joined the PPM Editorial Advisory Board as a Patient Advocate in March 2020.

