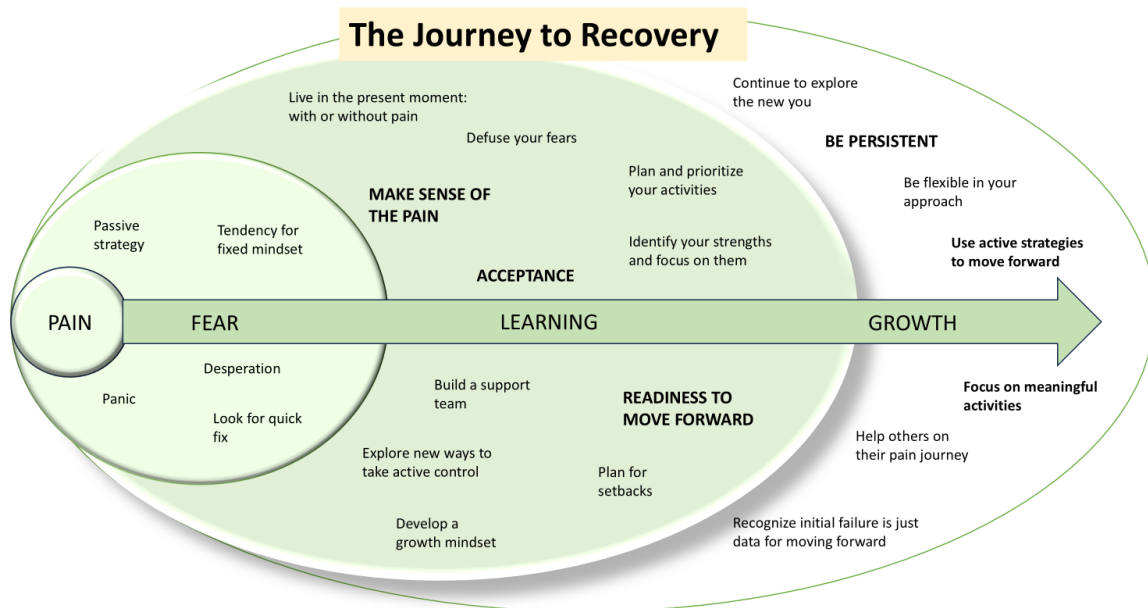


## The Journey to Recovery

The image below is my attempt to visualize a path forward from the struggle of living with pain to a life where pain is a more or less minor feature. This path does not assume that the pain goes away. Instead, it takes up less space in your experience. Imagine pain as an unwanted passenger in the bus that you are driving. If that passenger is trying to stand between you, the bus driver, and the windshield, blocking your view, driving (life) becomes impossible. But what if that passenger 'pain', while still on the bus, is sitting in the back row? It no longer controls your life.



When I look at this image, I see a path of hope and a way of moving forward to a life that is meaningful and full of value.

The question becomes how to move out of the fear zone towards the growth zone. The following sections will attempt to lay this out for you.

### Fixed vs growth mindsets

A critical concept in this conception of the journey to recovery is the distinction between a fixed mindset and a growth mindset. A fixed mindset is one that is characterized by a belief that your abilities are fixed and that you are unable to grow and learn new things. People who have this fixed mindset tend to view failure as the end of the road and that challenging situations are a complete roadblock. These folks tend to avoid trying new ideas, or new ways of doing things. They are reluctant to explore the possibilities. They want things in their life to magically return to the way it was before the pain became such a challenge for them. Unfortunately going back in time is not possible.

A fixed mindset will limit progress towards recovery and healing. Life always moves forward. Too much focus on being cured vs being healed is common. The concept of cure is based on a tissue model of pain. Chronic pain is much more than a simple tissue-based problem. Being healed is a whole person experience.

In contrast, a growth mindset includes a willingness to try new things in general and particularly as regards learning to live well, despite having pain. It is interesting to note that working to live well despite pain is actually more likely to reduce the impact of pain compared to focusing on decreasing pain than returning to your preferred life. Those with a growth mindset view failure of any trial step toward moving forward as just valuable information, not the end of the road. They also tend to look at everything in their lives, even unpleasant events, with curiosity rather than fear. A growth mindset is essential to the willingness or readiness needed to explore the many options that will allow for progress.

### **Phase one - Fear and confusion**

When the pain first raises its ugly head there may be confusion and fear. Confusion occurs when we do not understand why we hurt and what we can do about it. Confusion goes together with fear and a freeze response. It blocks our path as we reach out desperately in all directions at once. For clinicians who see people in this phase it is very tempting to give simple answers that often create new confusion because they rarely work for long. Those simple answers often involve passive “fixes” which unfortunately rarely work for chronic pain. Then the patient will move on to someone else. How many different clinicians will your patient see? How many different diagnoses to they get? How many of those diagnoses lead to more confidence? Modern medicine is fundamentally very fear and illness based. It is not health care; it is illness care.

Acceptance is a very difficult but crucial step toward recovery. **Acceptance is required to make the transition from the fear cycle and move into the learning cycle.** Many people confuse acceptance with resignation. These are very different terms. Resignation implies that there is nothing to be done and that you will just have to live with pain. It also implies that the life that you want is gone and will never return. On the other hand, acceptance implies that this is where you are at the moment and that you will need to stop relying on others to fix you. You will benefit from taking a more active role in your recovery, explore more options of **active** recovery and start to live life again, despite pain.

“In many ways learning to live with chronic pain is like learning to live next to the El in Chicago. This above ground transit system is old and loud. It roars past homes and businesses. Nearby residents feel the vibrations; it can be so noisy that they pause their conversations while the train goes by. Yet those who think a lower rent is worth the annoyance report that the sound soon ceases to be disruptive. You get used to it. Getting angry every time a train passes is a sure way to obsess over it. Our body’s pain system works the same way. The more we learn to calm it down, the less it bothers us; the more we try to be pain free, the more it takes over our lives”

James D. Hudson MD

Acceptance of your current reality is fundamental to developing a growth mindset.

### **Phase two – Learning**

Hope returns if several things happen. The first and most important is to make sense of pain and accept the reality of pain in your life. Making sense can mean many things but one common meaning is to learn how to actively gain control over symptoms. To make sense of what flares it up and what calms it down. When pain symptoms flare up without any rhyme or reason it is challenging to move forward. Pain that you have no control over is not that much different than torture! Learning consistent **active** ways of managing the pain is transforming. It is difficult to move forward if you cannot learn some way of making sense of pain. I highlighted the word active in the last sentence because learning active ways of

managing your pain (breathing exercises, stretching, distraction, movement, improving sleep) is much more powerful than passive ways such as hot or cold packs, medications, rest, etc. because the active tools give control to you. Another common way to make sense of the pain is to understand that this pain does not equal harm and more tissue damage. Fibromyalgia is a great example. As difficult as the pain of this condition is, no damage to your body occurs when this pain is present. Please note, not all chronic pain fits this concept, **but most does**.

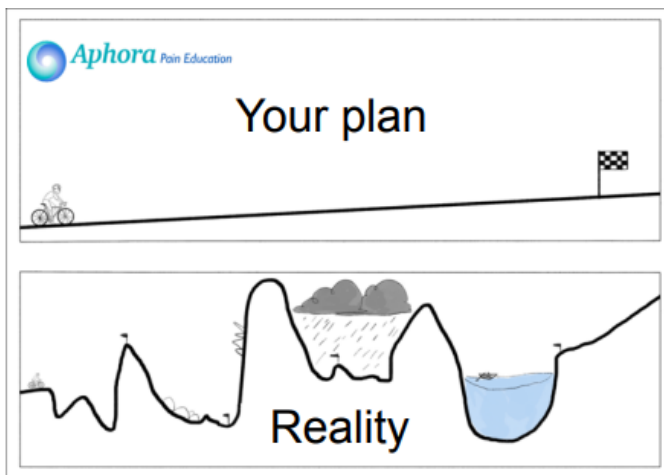
### Phase three – growth

The last phase, growth is characterized by more confidence and skill in the lessons learned in the learning phase while working the steps towards recovery.

One crucial new skill is planning. In this sense, planning includes planning your days and weeks so that you have the capacity to do the harder things in your life because you approach these with a full battery. Another aspect of planning is to have a plan in place for setbacks or flare ups. It is inevitable that flare ups will occur. If you have a plan in place prior to the flare up, you will get through that flare up faster and more importantly, you can learn from it. You can learn the trigger(s) and how to manage the situation without fear. This allows you to think of a flare up as a setback, not a start over.

Your road to recovery will be filled with obstacles. Buddhists have a wonderful phrase that applies here. “The obstacle is the path.” Looking at and analyzing the obstacles with curiosity rather than fear will allow you the headspace to see potential solutions much more clearly. You will then be able to smooth out the obstacles and find your way forward.

Recovery will be different for everyone. Rarely will recovery from chronic pain be a static situation because life will continuously throw challenges at you. Your future may continue to include pain but, much more importantly, it will include a life worth living.



Jim Stark MSPT

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