

# Prologue

Why a book called Pain and Stress? Shouldn't that be two books? Although hardly a week goes by without another headline about the ill-effects of stress, we still tend to think of pain and stress as separate problems. Most people think of pain as a 'medical' problem and stress as a 'psychological' problem. But although it is correct to think of pain as a signal of physical injury, there are many times when the causes of pain are not so clear-cut. Headaches, Gastrointestinal problems, Fibromyalgia and low back pain are just some of the types of pain which often defy adequate medical explanation. A growing mountain of research shows that when we hurt more than we should, stress is often the culprit, either as a predisposing factor, or as part of a reaction to injury and pain. Where stress is involved in pain it gives us a new way of understanding pain, and new possibilities for overcoming pain. This book is about how pain and stress overlap and how to use this information to reduce your pain.

We live in an era where pain is supposed to have been conquered and stress is accepted as an unfortunate but inevitable consequence of modern life. As Nelson Mandela once said, 'After climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb.' Unfortunately, if you have to climb too many hills, your health will suffer. People who have endured severe stress are more than twice as likely to develop chronic pain and/or so-called diseases of stress such as diabetes, heart disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. The types of pain which can result from stress are infinite, ranging from migraines that started following a family breakup, pelvic pain that started after childhood sexual abuse, or severe chronic low back pain triggered by a relatively insignificant back injury. The extent of the problem is shocking; one in five people suffer from chronic pain and/or some form of clinical stress such as anxiety, depression, anger-management problems etc.

Most people who have suffered severe stress are unaware of any connection between their health problems and stress – partly because of ignorance, partly because of a need to deny that there is a problem. Downplaying the effects of stress is better than feeling vulnerable or defeated. The adult survivor of abuse or neglect can start their own family and appear to have overcome their 'bad start' in life. The war veteran can don civilian clothes, get a job and appear to have left the horrors of combat behind. The benefit of moving on is that it gives us the sense that we have left the past behind us. The problem is that it leaves the physical and emotional effects of stress unacknowledged and unresolved. Behind the façade of normalcy, problems such as anxiety and depression, ill-health and chronic pain all remind us that ultimately, 'the body remembers'.

Recent advances in brain scanning technology and discoveries from the field of stress research have led to increased understanding of the relationship between pain and stress. We now know that stress triggers physical and mental changes including biochemical imbalances, physical tension, anxiety and depression, sleeping problems and fatigue, and emotional regulation problems. All these changes can increase our susceptibility to pain. For example, increased physical tension exacerbates the physical discomfort associated with pain; emotional disconnection inhibits our ability to regulate negative feelings; anxiety and depression exacerbate the emotional component of pain. No wonder so many chronic pain sufferers feel trapped in a confusing cycle of stress and pain. Stress can also affect our self-care – emotional disconnection makes it harder to respond effectively to physical needs. Victims of stress tend to delay seeking help, and when they do it is often for the symptom rather than the cause – more than 50% of depressed people's first visit to a medical practitioner is for a physical symptom. 1

Fortunately, in addition to increased understanding of the relationship between stress and pain, we also know a lot more about how the human nervous system works. We know for example, that the brain is organized in a hierarchical fashion with the lower areas of the brain responsible for processing sensory-emotional information and the upper areas responsible for thoughts. Sensory information flows 'upwards' from the body to the brain, and cognitive information 'downwards,' from the brain to the body. Neurologically, problems such as stress and pain mainly occur in the lower areas of the brain, which are responsible for sensing and feeling. We rely on our ability to think to manage problems such as stress and pain, but the link between the sensing/feeling parts of the brain and the thinking parts is tenuous and easily broken, especially during the developmental years. Severe stress affects our ability to self-regulate, as well as our physical and neurological development..

Increased understanding about how the brain works has enabled us to create more effective ways of communicating with the nervous system and changing the stressful sensory-emotional processes which maintain pain. Despite our perception of ourselves as rationale, thinking beings, the most effective way to overcome stress and pain is to stimulate the non-rationale lower areas of the brain where the core neurological processes underlying stress and pain are found. In practice this requires making contact with the negative feelings and introducing new information into the system. It's rather like what happens with a symphony orchestra when the conductor changes the theme of the music by introducing new instruments into the tune being played. Although we may not be conscious of it, this strategy is what we do every time we overcome a problem by taking incremental steps of mastery to build up sufficient feelings of calmness or confidence to overcome the problem.

The key to overcoming stress and pain is thus to have experiences which evoke feelings of relaxation and confidence, and somehow allow those feelings to filter in to our experience of pain. The challenge is that we be so damaged by stress and pain that we feel unable to find the resources within ourselves to overcome these problems. Anxiety, Depression, emotional disconnection and lack of safety and support can all make us feel helpless and trapped. Fortunately, thanks to the above-mentioned discoveries in neuroscience and stress research, we know how to recreate the natural healing processes necessary to overcome pain and stress. These involve a six-step process designed to reverse the physical and emotional effects of stress which maintain pain. Namely;

Safety & Support.

Reconnecting with your feelings.

Learning how to control stressful feelings and pain.

Changing your thinking.

Resolving trauma.

Building Resilience.

These steps are also designed to be consistent with how the brain processes information. Collectively and individually, these steps represent a new approach to overcoming stress and pain. These steps also form the basis of several new treatment approaches to stress and pain including EMDR, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy. While there is some physical basis to most types of chronic pain, to the extent that your pain is maintained or exacerbated by stress, these skills will help you to feel better.