

Managing pain

The experience of pain is very complex with lots of factors to consider.

There may be times where the pain seems more distant (when we're doing something interesting) or when it seems intense (when we focus on it).

Nerves travel from all over the body, through the spinal cord, to the brain.

The spinal cord is the first meeting point.

Imagine there are lots of gates in the spinal cord.

- the more open a gate is, the more pain signals get through, the more pain we experience.
- The more closed a gate is, the few pain signals get through, the less pain we experience.

Factors that open the gate:

- Stress and tension:
 - Pain often leads to increased worry; that things are worse, or we've injured ourselves.
- Attention:
 - Pain is very demanding of our attention.
 - Focusing on the experience of pain can intensify the sensation and draw resources away from soothing and easing pain.
- Lack of activity:
 - Not moving around because of pain can lead to stiff joints and muscles and deconditioning which leads to more pain when we move.
- Sleep:
 - Poor sleep means we are less rested and therefore more tired so experience more pain.

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Factors that close the gate:

- Relaxation and contentment:
 - Feeling relaxed means the muscles are less tense so there is no additional pain. It also increases restfulness so we are not tiring more quickly.
- Attention:
 - Being involved in things that interest us or doing things that make us happy provides pleasant distraction from pain. This means there is less space for pain signals to get through.
- Activity:
 - Exercise helps to maintain current levels of fitness and stamina. It releases endorphins which help us feel happier and more relaxed, and provides natural pain relief.
- Physical:
 - The right medication.
 - Heat, massage, acupuncture, tens etc.