

THE C.H.A.N.G.E. LAB: CHRONIC PAIN EDITION™

With Cynthia Austin, NBC-HWC



Is Your Pain Experience Being Shaped by Your Nervous System?

A First Look at Pain Coaching and What It Can Offer

If you are living with pain that has not responded the way you hoped to treatments, medications, or rest, you are not alone. Pain is one of the most complex experiences a human being can have. Understanding what is happening beneath the surface can be the first step toward feeling less confused, less afraid, and more in control of your own experience.

This guide is an invitation to think differently about pain and to explore whether pain coaching might be a helpful next step for you.

Understanding the Pain Experience

Pain is not simply a signal sent from a damaged body part to your brain. Current pain science understands pain as an output of the nervous system, a protective response generated when your brain concludes that something in your body or environment requires your attention.¹

This means pain is real and it is shaped by far more than tissue damage alone. Context, history, mood, attention, and learned patterns all influence how your nervous system responds, and therefore how pain feels.

A key insight from pain science: Pain intensity does not always equal the amount of damage present. Two people with the same injury can have very different pain experiences, because pain is personal, contextual, and shaped by the nervous system.^{1,2}

This does not mean your pain is “in your head” in a dismissive way. It means your whole self, your thoughts, your history, your stress, your sense of safety in the world, is part of the experience. That is actually good news, because it opens up possibilities.^{2,3}

Why Pain Can Become Linked With Stress, Fear, and Habits

The nervous system is a learning, dynamic system. Over time, especially when pain persists, it can become sensitive in ways that are no longer serving you. Here are some of the patterns that often emerge.

Every one of these is a normal human response. You are not wrong for feeling them or for expressing them. They are simply not helping change your pain experience.

- **Stress and tension.** When the body is in a state of chronic stress, the nervous system tends to amplify threat signals, including pain.¹
- **Fear and avoidance.** Fear of movement or reinjury is one of the most natural responses to pain, and it is not a mistake. It does, though, keep the pain experience going. This is why movement is not the starting point. It comes later, as the pain experience changes. You cannot move freely while your nervous system still feels unsafe, so safety always comes first.²

- **Attention.** Where attention goes, sensitivity often follows. A nervous system that has learned to monitor a particular area may keep that focus long after the original reason has passed.
- **Emotional patterns.** Grief, frustration, helplessness, and unprocessed emotions can influence how the nervous system interprets sensation.
- **Learned habits.** The brain is highly adaptive. Patterns of bracing, guarding, or alarm escalating can become automatic and reinforcing.

Recognizing these patterns is not about blame. None of this is your fault, and naming a pattern is not the same as causing it. The reason it matters is a pattern you cannot see runs on its own, while a pattern you can see is one you can begin to work with. And because the nervous system learns, the same system that learned these responses can also learn new ones. That is where your choices come back.

How Pain Coaching Can Help

Coaching can help you

- Understand your pain experience in a new light
- Identify your personal patterns and triggers
- Build self-awareness around thoughts, emotions, and sensations
- Develop practical strategies for daily life
- Strengthen your confidence and sense of agency
- Work alongside, not instead of, your medical care

Pain coaching is a collaborative space. You bring your lived experience. Your coach brings a structured process for exploring what might shift for you.

Reflective Questions to Sit With

There are no right or wrong answers here. These questions are simply an invitation to notice, with curiosity rather than judgment.

1. What have you noticed about when your pain increases? Is there a time of day, a situation, or a feeling that tends to come before it?
2. What have you noticed about when your pain decreases or feels more manageable? What is happening in those moments?
3. Are there times when your pain feels less threatening, even if it has not changed in intensity? What is different about those moments?
4. What role do stress, rest, connection, or distraction seem to play in your experience?
5. If your pain could speak, what do you imagine it might be trying to protect you from?

You do not need to have answers yet. Noticing is enough. That noticing is where the work often begins.

Moving Forward

If any part of this felt true to your own experience, that is worth paying attention to. You do not have to understand all of it yet, and you do not have to be convinced. Changing the pain experience is a learnable process, not a matter of pushing through with willpower or thinking positively in a toxic way. When the nervous system learns that it is safe, the pain experience can change, and the research shows those changes can hold over time.^{2,3}

The next step is a free consultation. It is a no pressure conversation about your pain experience, your questions, and whether coaching is a good fit for you. You do not need to be convinced this will work. You only need to be curious enough to explore the possibilities.

Schedule Your Free Consultation

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3. Ashar YK, Low EL, Knight K, Schubiner H, Gordon A, et al. Pain Reprocessing Therapy vs Placebo and Usual Care for Patients With Chronic Back Pain: 5-Year Follow-Up of a Randomized Clinical Trial. *JAMA Psychiatry*. 2025;82(10):1049-1051. doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2025.1844

Coaching works alongside your medical team, it does not replace them. It is always important that medical causes such as tumors, fractures, infections, and disease mechanisms have first been ruled out through a thorough exam. I do not diagnose, treat, or prescribe. My role is to teach you how pain works, help you spot the patterns that keep it going, and give you specific tools to calm your nervous system and change your pain experience, while your providers continue to care for the medical side.