

Outsmart Your Pain!

The Essential Guide to Overcoming Pain and Transforming Your Life

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Chapter 6

The Pain Release Process

“The way out of this vicious pain cycle is a wholesale change in how we perceive fear, suffering, and setbacks.” (Rob Heaton)

Our body’s pain mechanisms evolved to report problems; and they works well most of the time. The significant problem with pain is that our minds always demand explanations. We all want to know why we have pain. More importantly, we want to be reassured that our pain is not a sign of a serious problem. Unfortunately, this isn’t always obvious.

Let’s consider a young male patient with a herniated disc in his back. He has pain that’s consistent with his MRI findings. At the outset, everything appeared straightforward. An epidural steroid injection was performed, but he experienced little to no relief. What gives?

How do we explain why he continues to have pain? This can be a daunting challenge for patients who want definitive explanations for their suffering. However, traditional medical care doesn’t always have the answers. When doctors can’t produce the expected results, patients often become more anxious, triggering the release of significant quantities of stress hormones. The outcome: their pain intensifies.

We know that pain (especially chronic pain) is not always a reliable indicator of what’s going on in the body, because there’s always a layer

of brain-generated interpretation. The brain critically evaluates every message it receives based on the context in which the pain occurs. Given this, it stands to reason that we feel less pain when we feel calm and safe. On the other hand, if there's a perceived threat looming on the horizon - making us feel stressed, anxious, or fearful - then pain is likely to plague us.

Once the brain gauges the pain signal, and assesses the circumstances, it sends messages that influence nerve sensitivity. Like a knob on an old-fashioned radio receiver, the brain can amplify or decrease pain signals by controlling nerve sensitivity. The brain also sends messages to the organs (via the autonomic nervous system) that control blood flow and the release of various hormones and inflammatory chemicals that greatly impact pain intensity and healing potential.

As a perception in the brain, pain can be caused by faulty controls and gauges, rather than by actual tissue damage. This occurs in fibromyalgia and other centrally-mediated pain syndromes. We need to address these mechanisms, as opposed to focusing on the tissue that hurts. With this understanding of pain, we might assume that we can just think away our pain, but it isn't that simple.

Learning how to manage stress and control our thoughts is critical for self-regulation. Our mental and emotional (thinking and feeling) state is the biggest modulator of physical pain. However, most people have a challenge sorting out their own mental/emotional health. The ability to manage our thoughts and feelings is termed 'emotional intelligence.'

Additionally, many people have been so stressed out for so long that they experience a 'new normal.' They don't feel stressed, because the sensations are all that they know. They have no recent memory of living any other way. The reason they have a hard time thinking straight, or being aware of their feelings, is that their system is stuck in fight, flight,

or freeze mode, diverting blood and oxygen from the thinking and feeling centers in the brain to other parts of the body.

Indeed it's a set-up, but most people aren't aware that this is happening. In much the same way that we don't recognize when we have poor posture, people simply can't feel their stress, but they may be able to see it when they look in the mirror. I encourage people to check their faces if they are stressed, distressed, or in moderate to severe pain. Frown lines, squinting in discomfort, tears in the corners of the eyes, and a downturned mouth pursed in an angry scowl are just a few of the unmistakable signs to be aware of.

So, try this. Close your eyes. Open them. Relax. Breathe. Now, visualize an iceberg floating in the ocean. Your pain is the uppermost part of the iceberg, buoyed by our hidden feelings and thoughts, which make up the vastly larger chunk hidden under the surface. The iceberg analogy is an apt metaphor for pain, because water symbolizes emotion and the iceberg is a 'chunk' of frozen emotion in the body. When we recognize and release the part that is under the water, which is the foundation or root cause of the pain, then we can start to dissolve the whole iceberg. 'The Pain Release Process' is like a GPS system helping us locate the underlying target, so we can more effectively navigate it.

In the Pain Release Process, you'll learn how to root out stressful emotional issues that lie hidden under the surface of your pain. The Pain Release Process gets at the core of our 'pain being.' These are the problems we conveniently tuck in our tissues, hoping they won't be brought into the light of day. Pain doesn't have to be caused by easily-diagnosed tissue damage to be real. Pain can be driven by psychological issues, with a psychological root cause as the actual culprit. Don't let any doctor or loved one tell you that your pain is imaginary or 'all in your head.'

Learning how to modulate our brain function is best achieved using a combination of physiological and psychological approaches. Physiological impact can be accomplished through any means of making the painful area feel better or more supported. Massage, bracing or taping, the use of ice or heat, and topical salves are all helpful. It's also beneficial to practice simple breathing and relaxation exercises to stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system. Anything that gives you hope and confidence that you can get better, will go a long way to helping you calm your nervous system and alleviate your pain.

Learning effective coping strategies is also necessary. On a psychological level, we can learn to positively influence our perception filters (the context of the pain) created by our thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and emotions. By learning to consciously manage our controls and gauges, we can avoid constantly triggering our unconscious autonomic fight-or-flight response. Knowledge and perspective about our beliefs, fears, and behaviors is essential. It's best not to hide in a state of denial, because pain will ultimately find you and target you.

Unfortunately, too few people have been exposed to these insights. As such, people in pain often feel at the mercy of what they are told by doctors and healthcare professionals, many of whom operate with outdated ideas and beliefs about what pain is and how to treat it. Additionally, it's important to recognize that everything in life is constantly changing or dying. This is also true of pain; it has the potential to change or even disappear. But, we have to believe this to make it a reality!

Remember, the most powerful predictor for recovery from pain is our expectation that recovery is possible. In discovering how to take control of pain, you must agree to take an active role in reframing the story of your pain. You can do this by seeking out more comfortable life experiences and positive and inspiring social interactions. Above all, try

to avoid dramatizing your pain. This is the most direct route to dampening the circuits of pain and easing the brain's interpretation of what's actually happening in your body.

The Pain Release Process

The Eight Steps to Release Pain

The Pain Release Process (PRP) will be explored in the following pages as part of our pain medicine toolbox. The Pain Release Process (PRP) can help you become more cognizant of the subconscious human drives that pull you out of awareness and self-regulation, keeping you stuck on the proverbial painful 'hamster wheel' of life.

Eight steps to release pain and guide yourself back to health and happiness:

1. Practice self-responsibility.
2. Root out hidden mental and emotional issues that cause fear.
3. Release past hurts, the need for control, and resistance to change.
4. Reframe your pain story.
5. Rest and reset.
6. Practice self-regulation.
7. Retrain mental habits and physical postures that contribute to pain.
8. Reclaim your power to fully heal.

Step #1 in the Pain Release Process

Practice self-responsibility.

I am fond of the mantra, 'If it's to be, it's up to me.' Pain is not for the faint of heart! What if pain is really a test to see if we're willing to rise above our current circumstances and fulfill our highest potential?

This is where the test gets complicated. This is not about acute pain following a surgical procedure, where pharmaceutical intervention is often warranted. This is different. This is about the part of human nature in which one falls into victim mode, looking to blame something or someone else for their misery. The answer lies in making mental shifts, recognizing that our emotions and thoughts are solely our responsibility. Being accountable for your life and your choices can take various forms, from modifying how you walk to using proper your posture to manifesting a new mindset. The brain and the body need to change together as a unified whole.

When we recognize pain as a wake-up call, we're motivated to make change. To improve your condition, you don't have to make wholesale changes all at once. You can start with small shifts that bring you back to a better state of balance. Learn to listen to what your body is telling you. Then, let those symptoms motivate you to make small shifts. Neuroplasticity confirms the brain is capable of constantly changing. This is, in part, why nothing in life is permanent.

Pain is experienced largely based on our perspective. We can agree that we are always able to change our perspective, but taking responsibility for doing so is often challenging. This is the first step in releasing pain. We must take responsibility, and do the hard work, of changing our perspective. This necessary first step is not something we can delegate to our doctors, therapists, or loved ones.

We also need to appreciate that action taken to facilitate change has the same consequences as inaction and avoidance. Health, happiness, and success are all consequences of our choices to take action or shy away. In this light, persistent pain can be viewed as a factor of the consequences of poor lifestyle choices. Releasing pain requires an honest self-appraisal of the various lifestyle factors that contribute to it.

Common variables include diet and nutrition, sleep, relaxation, physical activity and exercise, mental stimulation, having a clear sense of purpose, pursuit of creative expression, relationships, and our physical environments.

When you consult a medical professional with pain complaints, you have to realize that they may neglect important information about your lifestyle issues and poor habits. For many doctors practicing in the traditional American healthcare (insurance) model, they can only consult with patients for five to ten minutes at a time. Doctors have to cut straight to the point and learn what's bothering you at the moment. With limited time and energy, the doctor needs to identify the crux of your pain, which is paramount to initial diagnosis and treatment. I would urge you to take self-responsibility, recognize this reality, demand more time from your doctor, and bring up your deeper lifestyle issues as you become aware of them.

If we recognize what needs adjusting within ourselves, and proactively implement changes to course-correct, we suffer less and experience more joy. This is the essence of self-awareness. It's about being deeply in touch with our own needs, without being afraid to advocate for ourselves.

An example of this is the everyday office worker who sits at a desk most of the day, usually with poor ergonomics. This means that their sitting posture at their desk is sub-optimal, causing them to have to unconsciously adjust their body to fit the desk. Instead, office workers should do their best to make ergonomic changes to their desk set-up to make their time in the office easier on the body.

Recently, the American Medical Association (AMA) developed a new public health campaign with the slogan - 'Sitting is the new smoking!' This means that sedentary habits are really poor for our health. As a

species, we're just not designed to sit all day. As such, sit-stand desks are increasingly recommended as a reasonable accommodation for people with back, neck, and arm pain.

Step #2 in the Pain Release Process

Root out hidden mental and emotional issues that cause fear.

Ralph Waldo Emerson famously said, "Curiosity will conquer fear even more than bravery will." When we explore how to root out our hidden mental and emotional issues, we're usually referring to internal cognitive distortions (or distorted thinking) and unconscious fears, rather than external environmental threats. Fear can save us from danger, but it can also be illusory, self-generated by the mind, leading to faulty neural pathways in the brain.

'F.E.A.R.' is an acronym for 'False Evidence Appearing Real.' Copy this and write it down. Now put it where you can see it. Read it every time you're scared. Now imagine your strength. Evaluate the real. Be in your truth.

Fear is a construct of the mind that activates when we feel threatened. It triggers us to 'play it small' in life, keeping us confined to our comfort zone. It often becomes an excuse, causing us to avoid seizing what we want to achieve in life. Fear can trigger our innate threat response resulting in anxiety, worry, and obsessive thoughts. Fear stirs us to protect ourselves from further hurt, prompting us to close off and become 'supra-protective,' like a turtle safe in the confines of its shell.

Fear usually arises from uncertainty and our perceived need to control our life circumstances. However, there can be no doubt that, from time to time, life will throw us curve balls, which are growth opportunities

and tests of our faith. At the end of the day, our task is to take all of this fear and transform it into courage.

It's the proverbial swing of the pendulum from one extreme to the other that takes us from feeling like a victim looking to assign blame for our suffering to a champion who owns the power to heal. When we transcend fear, we rise above our unconscious thoughts, beliefs, and reactions that previously limited us to a fear-based reality.

When we accomplish this, we begin to feel truly safe in the world and in our own skin. We can embody the spirit of courage, which gives us enhanced physical and mental resources to experience the world differently. With these new insights, developed by integration of the mind and the body, we can defeat our mental patterns that previously led us down a path of pain and self-defeat. Instead, we can now aspire to achieve optimal health and self-empowerment.

Step #3 in the Pain Release Process

Release past hurts, the need for control, and resistance to change.

“Accept your past without regret, handle your present with confidence, and face your future without fear.” (Anonymous)

‘Letting go’ can easily trigger the fear response. When we release something or someone from our lives, leaving it or them behind, we can become intensely afraid of what might be substituted. This is fear of the unknown. This is a fairly common pattern I see in patients who experience pain flare-ups when they are faced with letting go of a habit.

This reminds me of a young professional in her mid-thirties, who had recently moved to my area for a new job. Her previous physician had treated her non-traumatic back and neck pain for several years with

opioid medication. she came to me expecting I would continue this same course of treatment.

It was clear at the first visit that she had become accustomed to taking multiple doses of opioid pain medication per day. I reassured her that her medical records reflected a normal MRI of the back and neck. I explained that I do not prescribe opioids for benign chronic pain, especially when there is no clear tissue pathology, as I do not believe in treating pain purely as a symptom.

She was skeptical, but agreed to a course of physical therapy, with the goal of identifying ergonomic factors that might be contributing to her pain. She returned one month later to follow up. I again suggested to her that opioids were not an ongoing treatment option, because her condition simply didn't warrant the use of long-term drugs. I spent a considerable amount of time explaining to her why this drug, and others like it, are not a healthy option for many patients with chronic pain. It did not take long after I explained this that I could see her face getting red and her emotions becoming edgy. Right before my eyes, she went into a state of panic, becoming very defensive, saying 'If you're going to take away my medication, what are you going to give me instead?'

The tricky thing about fear is that it makes us cling to what we know, even if it keeps us stuck in a rut, no matter how bad it makes us feel. We tend to embrace complacency, that familiar ogre that lurks within all of us. Of course, some people are more ready to exercise the courage to overcome it.

Getting unstuck requires us to remember our injury or trauma and reconsider whether we have to hold on to the story that we attach to our suffering. We don't need to get over the past, we just need to get past it. This does not come naturally or easily to many people in our topsy-turvy world.

Letting go and moving on requires us to think and do things differently. Visualize fear of change as a powerful magnet designed to hold you in place. Releasing the hold that fear has on us is unsettling, bringing us face-to-face with the strongest emotional drivers of human nature: love, fear, and rage.

In the pages to come, you will explore a number of recommendations for letting go and embracing change.

First, ‘embrace curiosity’ about what is possible. This gives us hope that a better solution to our pain problem can be found. We may develop a fresh new perspective or try a new treatment approach. This can help reduce stress, so we can think more clearly.

Second, ‘squash negativity’ by questioning invisible, irrational, and unproductive thoughts. Author Byron Katie teaches a method of self-inquiry, which urges us to investigate the following questions. Is this thought true? Can I be absolutely sure it’s true? How do I react when I think this way? And lastly, who would I be without this thought? As we ask these questions, we tend to react less to the stress created by these old thought patterns.

Third, ‘shrink the mountain to a molehill.’ Many people catastrophize their pain. While it’s understandable, this emotional reaction steeps our brain in chronic pain and causes it to employ mechanisms, such as central sensitization and sympathetic overdrive, that magnify and intensify our suffering. By changing our perspective and consciously overriding these automatic responses, we can take away the ‘magnifying glass’ we previously focused on our pain, making our issues much easier to overcome.

Fourth, ‘swim in the deep end,’ by acknowledging your hidden emotions. This means sitting with them until they no longer maintain their hold over you. This is crucial, as these feelings take up valuable space in our heads, zapping our energy, and keeping us stuck in the past. Holding onto these hidden emotions keeps us ‘locked up’, manifesting physically in the body as chronic muscle tension. Dr. John Sarno dubbed this ‘tension myoneural syndrome’ (TMS), which is considered a psychosomatic condition by mainstream medicine. However, he successfully treated thousands of TMS patients at the Rusk Institute.

Fifth, ‘anchor into the future’ by creating realistic goals and a clear positive vision of the future, which can help you let go of pain from the past. Remember that the brain has difficulty engaging in conflicting beliefs. If you’re focused on a better tomorrow, you will be less likely to remain stuck in yesterday. This is certainly challenging, but when it comes to envisioning your future, think of the maxim, ‘Fake it til you make it.’ Feeling the future in your cells is the key to manifesting a better life.

Sixth, ‘discard remnants of the past’ by simplifying and lightening your load. This helps you to move forward. Discard unnecessary baggage and try to carry fewer burdens. Sometimes, you might be delighted to find meaningful treasures buried under everything that you’ve accumulated. One reward of letting go is discovering long-hidden personal artifacts that might be clues that help you find your way to a beautiful new life. A neat ritual for releasing your past hurts is the act of designating a ‘Satan’s suitcase,’ such as an old suitcase or box, where you store the artifacts from your painful past. Then you put this suitcase to the side, until you’re ready to let it go completely. Think of it as putting your past pain behind you, because it’s trapped away, and you’ll no longer be able to see or feel it.

Seventh, ‘repair relationships and practice forgiveness.’ Many interpersonal connections become ‘frayed’ and mired in conflict due to mistreatment or misunderstanding. When we make amends for our part in a relationship gone badly, it’s very liberating, releasing the pain from the past. When this is not possible or appropriate, then forgiveness becomes our most powerful healing tool. Forgiveness is a funny thing. The things we hold on to clearly weigh us down and keeps us stuck in threat mode, perpetuating stress and pain. Genuine and heartfelt forgiveness can move us to believe that we have more to gain by forgiving, than from staying angry. The paradox of forgiveness is that we think we are forgiving the other person. However, we are really forgiving ourselves for our role in the painful situation. Self-forgiveness is important from any perspective.

We live in a world in which our senses are constantly bombarded with unrealistic images of how we should look and behave. The aspect of self-imposed pressure to conform to these external and internal messages can be overwhelming and even become a kind of self-injury. Feeling that we ‘don’t measure up,’ ‘aren’t good enough,’ or ‘will never amount to anything,’ can cause us to self-sabotage. In these instances, self-forgiveness is the greatest gift we can give ourselves. It’s an act of self-love and self-preservation.

Eighth, ‘pass on the perfect.’ Perfectionism and the need to control circumstances in our lives (and the lives of others) are common emotional triggers of pain. The perfectionist pushes themselves to the brink and the ‘control freak’ pushes others. These are both traits that drive people to attain success at all costs. Yet, they always come at a price: they makes us susceptible to pain.

Ninth, ‘give up your grief.’ Letting go of grief is a challenge for many people. In my practice, I have seen firsthand the power that unresolved

grief has as a pain generator. Like fear, anger, and rage, grief is a challenging emotion masquerading as pain.

For many years, I treated a lovely woman in her eighties. After the death of her husband of 60 years, she developed a severe case of shingles on her chest. Because of the stress of her loss, and the intense reactions of grief, her immune system became suppressed, leading to development of a form of chronic pain called post-herpetic neuralgia. We attempted to make her comfortable using all of the available topical and oral medications, but her grief was so intense and persistent that her pain became hard to manage. At my insistence, she finally agreed to go to grief counseling. With that, her coping strategies improved, her pain lessened, and her overall health improved. Grief is such a powerful emotion that we often hear about couples in which one partner dies shortly after the other, because the pain of the broken heart is too hard to bear.

Step #4 in the Pain Release Process

Reframe your pain story.

In his children's book about self-mastery, *Zach Gets Frustrated*, William Mulcahy teaches kids how to learn healthy ways of dealing with frustration. Mr. Mulcahy's paradigm of 'Name it, Tame it, and Reframe It' makes for a wonderful tool for dealing with pain. Allow me to demonstrate how this process works.

'Naming your pain' helps you to become more aware of its underlying causes. It's also a playful exercise that accesses your right brain function, which gives you access to more creative solutions to problems. This way you don't get mired in analysis paralysis. One way to name your pain in a way that can remove the trigger is to use humor. Consider giving silly names to your triggers. When we name our pain in this way,

making it seem more benign, it can draw away some of its power over us. Remember that we don't want to feed negative images and perceptions to our subconscious mind. When people come to see me with pain issues, they often have trouble finding the words to describe their pain. When we don't have a consistent language for pain, we have a hard time relating to it. As we develop new understandings of pain as a messenger of the mind-body connection, we will need to work on new ways of creating a language for it.

'Taming your pain' takes you out of your automatic fear-based response patterns. Developing a more relaxed attitude brings you into the present moment, empowering you to more authentically connect with the messages your body is sending you. Utilize simple breathing techniques and other soothing, self-care strategies, such as progressive body relaxation (the Body Scan Meditation), Epsom salt baths, essential oils, spending time in nature, prayer, and listening to music. These practices will help get you out of your head and back into your body, where you need to be to reverse the effects of stress, frustration, pain, and other negative states.

'Reframing your pain' becomes possible once you recognize that you can eliminate the fear and frustration associated with it. Then, and only then, can you change your perspective. Human beings are susceptible to 'framing effects,' meaning that we respond to situations based on how they're presented to us. You can 're-contextualize' your pain using everything you've learned about the brain and nervous system, thereby allowing you to move into a place of true healing.

We've established that nothing in life is permanent, that we can choose our thoughts, and that we can take action to change anything in our life that's not working for us. Simple examples of reframing include: 'This too shall pass' and 'Everything has a way of working itself out.'

Reframing through positive affirmations is a wonderful way to bypass the subconscious mind and our automatic reactive nature. This can help cut short our suffering. Reframing or rewriting our pain story doesn't change the facts of the narrative. It allows us to see the facts from a different, more enlightened, and more empowered perspective. We can begin to see ourselves and others in a different light, helping us to reduce the shame and blame that often make up the plot of our pain narrative. We can then take ownership of the story, telling it from a more balanced and empathetic point of view. This retelling transforms us from the role of a victim to the hero of our own story.

Step #5 in the Pain Release Process

Rest and reset.

“Jason Bourne concentrated on rest and mobility. From somewhere in his forgotten past, he understood that recovery depended upon both and he applied rigid discipline to both.” (Robert Ludlum, *The Bourne Identity*)

Does art imitate life or does life imitate art? We can learn a lot from the stories depicted in movies, because they are universal tales of human suffering and our remarkable ability to overcome obstacles. In many of these stories, a secret government agent accomplishes his or her ‘impossible’ mission, then has to go ‘dark,’ while the blowback occurs and the story unfolds. In the same way, we need to develop patterns of taking action, while balancing with adequate rest. This is challenging for many who attempt to proceed through life relentlessly, without allowing for sufficient recovery time.

When it comes to healing an acute injury, or resolving an overuse syndrome, science demonstrates that ‘relative rest’ as opposed to strict bed rest is an essential ingredient in any healing recipe. It allows us to

reset the nervous system's response to injury, pain, and stress and reduces direct tissue damage caused by overload. People often mistakenly believe that rehabilitation is only about physical exercise. However, the injured body part needs to feel supported in order to heal. 'Relative rest' allows us to give injured tissues a break, while we continue to exercise our healthy, uninjured body parts.

Some people have faulty notions about the negative effects of rest. They believe that, if they rest, they will become overweight and out of shape. Remember that caloric intake is far more relevant to our weight than exercise. Thus, when we have to rest in order to heal, we can choose to reduce our caloric intake. Looking at sleep and nutrition are also important considerations in the early healing phase of an injury. Without these supportive measures, pain can become chronic. Diets with the proper balance of protein, carbohydrates, and fats are essential. Core nutrients such as vitamin C, vitamin A, vitamin D, zinc, and magnesium also promote healing. We will discuss this more in the Chapter 8, called 'Health as a Habit.'

Another incorrect assumption about rest is that we need strict bed rest in order to heal. This myth has been debunked. It's generally accepted now that 'early mobilization' has replaced strict bed rest. This principle applies to everything from back pain to tendon ruptures to fracture healing. Considerable scientific evidence shows that in the early stages of healing the stimulation of gentle movement is a crucial part of triggering and maintaining a healing response. This also helps to prevent the painful loop of fear avoidance, which we see so often in chronic pain patients. For these people, it hurts to move so they decide that the only way to control the pain is to avoid moving. This can also occur when they're so anxious about their pain getting worse, that they walk around in a braced or guarded posture. It's as if they waiting for the other shoe to drop!

We need to strike a balance between rest and mobilization, so that we can stay active, without putting too much stress on our injured tissues. Injuries to our feet, knees, and hips are difficult to heal because it's harder to rest these areas.

It's also challenging to recognize when our injuries have fully healed, because we have stopped exercising. Returning to exercise after injury needs to be done in a graded fashion, so we don't re-aggravate the injured tissue. Timing of return to exercise is complicated and everyone is unique. Consulting your physician, physical therapist, or certified personal trainer will be critical in developing with the best plan for you to return to activity.

In my experience, cross-training with water exercise programs or swimming can be very helpful in recovering from lower extremity injuries, because it eliminates gravity, allowing for graded muscle activation in a supported environment. It also completely changes the context of exercise and pain, because we don't usually associate the pool as a place where might get injured. Caution needs to be taken to gradually increase time in the pool, because of the added resistance in the water, which doesn't impact us when we exercise on land.

Upper extremity injuries from golf and tennis are also challenging to recover from, because of overuse, poor form, and the fact that we return too quickly to the course or court. This makes healing of torn tendons and irritated tissue incomplete and makes us more susceptible to re-injury.

Healing these kinds of injuries requires several things:

1. Decrease tissue load by reducing frequency of stress and improving form or modifying the equipment.

2. Reduce inflammation in general by managing the stress response effectively (this is part of the reset process).
3. Consider regenerative medicine techniques, such as platelet-rich plasma (PRP), in lieu of steroid injections.

Steroid injections can be helpful for painful arthritis and inflamed joints. However, use them with caution in tendons and soft tissues, because ultimately they lead to tissue breakdown, which further enhances risk of re-injury.

On an emotional level, coming to grips with the need to ‘relatively rest’ and reset is also challenging. Many of us enjoy exercise, using it as a way to manage stress and maintain our mood. We often have the attitude that if a little activity is good, then more is better. Beware! There is a delicate balance between effort and rest, which requires us to pay close attention to early warning signs, such as mild discomfort and swelling. This is especially true with relatively minor symptoms like plantar fasciitis, IT band syndrome, shin splints, and rotator cuff tendonitis. We usually don’t expect these minor issues to require us to rest and reset, but they usually do.

Step #6 in the Pain Release Process

Practice self-regulation.

“Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom.” (Viktor Frankl)

Self-regulation is defined as our ability to behave in ways that supports our long-term survival and is also in keeping with our highest values. Understanding both aspects of this is important. Violation of our values invariably causes bad feelings, which work counter to self-regulation.

On an emotional level, self-regulation allows us to calm down when we are upset and uplift ourselves when we are suffering. On a physiological level, our feelings and emotions move us by sending chemical messages and electrical signals to our muscles, preparing us for action. According to Dr. Steven Stosny, our emotions motivate us to do one of three things: approach, avoid, or attack.

1. ‘Approach emotions’ promote interest and a sense of fun, as well as compassion and trust. These are essential for loving relationships. Approach emotions also lead to behaviors such as openness to learning new things, socializing, cooperating, and setting appropriate limits.
2. ‘Avoid emotions’ cause distancing and social isolation. They perpetuate resistance to change and make it harder to seek help. Avoid emotions are at the root of many self-defeating behaviors.
3. ‘Attack emotions’ often undermine and harm us by stirring up anger and rage. These negative emotions promote behaviors such as manipulation, threatening, and bullying.

We give psychological meaning to anything that makes us feel uncomfortable. Self-regulation is easier when we focus our energy on our values, rather than our feelings, because feelings are fickle. When we focus on feelings, they often get amplified and distorted, triggering our fear response. Focusing on our values keeps us feeling better about ourselves and focused on the positive solutions. Self-regulation also calls us to appreciate delayed gratification, be aware of our own emotional state, express our needs and feelings, and calm ourselves and others appropriately.

Step #7 in the Pain Release Process

Retrain mental habits and physical postures that contribute to pain.

“Change your thoughts and change your world.” (Norman Vincent Peale)

Our bodies physically react and change in response to every thought that we have. This is a result of chemical messengers called neurotransmitters, which facilitate communication between our nervous system, organs, and cells. The power of thought has been proven in studies. There’s growing evidence that we can improve almost anything, from our vision to our fitness, by intentionally directing our thoughts. However, because this phenomenon is totally free, the pharmaceutical companies don’t want you to know about it, as people might start eschewing their expensive, frequently ineffective, and sometimes harmful products.

Thoughts can even program our cells through proteins called peptides, which are molecules that are linked with specific thoughts and emotions. When these peptides surge through our body and connect with specific receptors on our cells, our cells adapt. If we bombard our cells with negative peptides, then we bias the system this way, making it harder to receive positive peptides. This programs the cells to keep us stuck in negativity. Since our cells naturally regenerate every two months, we can actually retrain the system by using strategies such as gratitude, mindfulness practices, and positive thinking.

As Deepak Chopra says, “Our cells are always eavesdropping on our mind.” This means we can affect how our genes are expressed through our thought patterns. The science of epigenetics further demonstrates that our genes can be switched on or off, based on our life experiences and how we perceive them.

Our thoughts and perceptions control our biology. Through a combination of our thoughts and lifestyle choices, we get to choose the

inputs we provide. Making this process conscious, rather than habitual, is the key to personal power and ultimate health.

There are Buddhist practices that help us leave the mind out of our perception of pain. In these exercises, when pain arises in our body, we investigate whether it comes with a sensation or an emotion or a thought. Then, we let it pass without getting attached or identifying with it. Like a cloud floating across the sky, it slowly drifts away. This is how we can start to exercise restraint over the mind. Focusing awareness on the pain at the level of physical sensation keeps the pain in the body and out of the mind. There, we can meet our pain head on.

Step #8 in the Pain Release Process

Reclaim your power to fully heal.

“We reclaim our power by loving the parts of ourselves we were once taught to hate.” (Bryant H. McGill)

Pain is not our enemy. Learning to love every part of us, even the parts that hurt, are a requirement for healing. Taking self-responsibility for identifying the messages embedded in your pain, as well as growing your awareness of your automatic triggers, will free you from suffering.

These two actions force us to grow and evolve, and teach us to effectively cope with the challenging and unpleasant aspects of life. In mastering both our emotional and physical natures, we can unite the mind and body. This brings our innate special powers of an open mind and open heart to the healing table. Integrating these two special forces allows us to learn to love all parts of us - the broken and the whole - and reclaim our power to fully heal!