

I have been a postural therapist for 12+ years working with people in chronic pain. Most of the clients I work with already tried standard Western Medicine practices. Their doctor performed an MRI or X-Ray. Told them what was wrong. Prescribed injections, medication, physical therapy, or in extreme cases surgery. The pain may get better for periods of time, but often continues to persist in one form or another. Sadly, people are in more pain today than ever before.

We cannot purely treat the site of the pain for long term relief. Western medicine teaches us to focus on our symptoms, which often creates emotions of fear and anxiety that just exacerbate the issue. Our culture teaches us that our pain is purely structural. This is a very different model than many other cultures that recognize the emotional and mental aspects of pain. This old model of pain and disease must be obliterated for the health crisis in this country to shift. We must begin to embrace a biopsychosocial model, which incorporates both our biology and psychology for long term health.

Research has shown that stenosis, bulging discs, and arthritis are not what cause pain. In fact, you can take two people with the same structural abnormalities shown on an MRI and one will have pain and one will not. Why do you think that is? Why do millions of people with chronic pain do not show current tissue damage?

I have witnessed clients come in for a session maintaining their knee pain is due to a lack of cartilage or their shoulder pain is due to a rotator cuff tear; however, we are able to relieve the pain within the session. Did the structural abnormality heal within the hour? Probably not. What more likely happened is we released muscular tension patterns, brought the body back into balance, and thereby alleviated the pain. These tension patterns can often be resolved using physical modalities, but in cases where we are not able to reduce the pain through physical means, we must also look how emotions effect muscular tension patterns and influence the nervous system.

As a postural therapist, I have seen people come in who are structurally misaligned, yet have very little pain, and people whose alignment isn't all that bad with a great deal of pain. This generates many important questions, such as "What truly causes pain?"

The biopsychosocial model takes a holistic view of chronic pain. It looks at the structure and physiological pathology. It also looks at how thoughts, emotions, and behaviors such as psychological distress, fear, avoidance, and coping mechanisms can play into pain. It also factors in socio-economic factors, cultural factors, work issues, and family circumstances. The biopsychosocial model maintains pain and muscular tension cannot be categorized into physiological, psychological, or social factors alone; instead, all three factors must be addressed.

The physical symptoms people are experiencing are very real, but in many cases, they occur in the brain, not in the structure or tissues. Physiological changes in muscle tension, nerve firing, breathing, and blood flow can create severe pain. For example, fear and anxiety can have such a physiological response in the body, that they can cause panic attacks so severe they mimic a heart attack. This intense emotional stress can also cause muscular tension patterns that have a strong tendency to shift the position of your posture. This does not mean anything is “structurally” wrong or that you are “broken.” Muscles move bones and we can influence the muscular system with a variety of modalities provided we address the root dysfunction and not just the symptom or site of the pain.

Although chronic pain manifests in the physical body, we must also treat the brain response. For example, your brain learns to fear as a protective mechanism stemming from past experiences. These danger signals have the tendency to get activated and stuck; therefore, the more often a certain type of pain is triggered, the easier it becomes for the brain to replicate it. However, we can retrain the brain that the sensations that are being interpreted as dangerous are safe. A great example of this is phantom limb pain. Amputees report pain in a limb that’s not there. There is obviously no physical damage triggering the pain and we can’t apply physical treatments to a limb that’s not present; however, in many cases, with mirror therapy and visualization we are able to trick the brain and reduce the pain.

John Sarno, a professor of rehabilitation medicine at New York University school of medicine, has helped thousands of people in chronic pain that the medical community was not able to. His book *Healing Back Pain* was a New York Times best seller, and his approach has cured thousands of people, yet mainstream medicine still debates whether to consider him legitimate. In *Healing Back Pain* Sarno speaks of a psychological condition that causes symptoms such as chronic

back pain, fibromyalgia, and gastrointestinal problems. He calls this Tension Myositis Syndrome (TMS)

In *Healing Back Pain*, Sarno's basic message is that in the majority of cases back pain is a symptom created by the unconscious mind as a distraction to aid in the repression of strong unconscious emotions. This model basically maintains that the nervous system learns to detect danger. If you have an experience that feels physically or emotionally unsafe, whether it be an injury or abuse, the brain learns to go into protective defense mode.

If you are physically injured, such as a broken bone, sprained ankle, or torn muscle, the body learns to protect the area and build compensatory patterns. Just as physical compensations occur, so do compensatory emotional patterns. For example, if a child is emotionally shamed, they may shift into a restricted posture, or repress emotions which will cause a state of tension in the nervous system. An overactive nervous system may respond by producing physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach issues, muscle tension, back pain etc. At any point the nervous system can hit a tipping point and begin a cycle of chronic pain. The brain then becomes more protective, detecting danger and triggering a pain response even when no danger is present.

So how do we retrain the nervous system to feel safe again once the initial physical or emotional issue has been removed? Although I believe strongly in Sarno's work, I would maintain there are many ways to re-educate the nervous system. This can be done physically, emotionally, and mentally. The most important aspect is to treat the "whole" person. Provided the modality you are using is NOT focusing on the symptom, but is addressing the root dysfunction, we can generate healthy movement to get the energy flowing and the muscular and nervous system to relax. It's also important that whatever modality you are using is self-empowering. Becoming an active part of your healing process is often mandatory for long-term health. Finally, whatever approach you use must begin with the understanding you are not broken. We must take the focus off the pain and the symptom and focus on what the body and mind "can" do to heal.

There are many methods out there to choose from. Some approaches such as the ones I practice, use customized exercises, movements, breath-work, and visualization to release muscular tension. We do not treat the symptom or pain. We do not see the body as damaged, instead we look for where the body is out of

alignment and holding tension. We also educate and empower our clients in the healing process. Using approaches like this in conjunction with re-educating the mind to understand the biological processes of pain is very successful in reducing chronic pain symptoms.

Just as Chinese Medicine has maintained since ancient times, it's the integration of the physical, emotional, mind, and spirit that creates a balanced body. You may find you need to address all these aspects to fully heal chronic pain.

We must remember the following points if we are going to rewire our brain to release a pain cycle:

1. **KNOWLEDGE GIVES YOU POWER:** You must begin to understand the biological processes of pain. This education is linked with a decrease in symptoms, improved function, reduced fear, improved mobility, and a balanced nervous system.
2. **PAIN IS DESIGNED TO PROTECT:** Pain is designed to protect. It helps us survive by acting as a danger signal. Pain motivates us to take it easy when tissues need to rest and heal. Pain is designed to keep you safe and can be very important; however, it's also important to recognize when you are stuck in a chronic pain cycle that is no longer serving its purpose.
3. **PAIN IS NOT JUST A PHYSICAL EXPERIENCE:** Old models taught us that pain is caused by physical damage to the body. We must begin to recognize that this is just one of many factors and in fact can be one of the least influential factors when it comes to chronic pain.
4. **ALL PAIN ORIGINATES IN THE BRAIN.** The pain system is sophisticated and makes high-level decisions. All pain originates in the brain. Your brain is always the one calling the shots and deciding how much pain to let you experience. Although pain is in your head it is very real. What's important to recognize, is that you can have severe symptoms without structural damage. Understanding this is critical to influencing your pain cycle.
5. **PAIN IS AN OPINION NOT A FACT:** Your brain determines how much pain you should experience in each moment to protect you. First assess whether there is "current" tissue damage. Then ask yourself, how much are you focusing on the pain? How afraid are you of the pain? How much are you trying to control the pain? In many cases the brain keeps producing pain even when the structural issue heals as a result of how you think about the situation and interpret it.

6. TO GET RID OF PAIN YOU HAVE TO TREAT THE BRAIN: The way you experience pain has to do with how you interpret the signal. Even if it started as a structural injury, at some point it will be important to open yourself to a biopsychosocial model.

Following are some questions to begin to ask yourself:

- What does your pain mean to you?
- Do you send signals to your body that you are fragile? Broken?
- How can you let go of tension in your body?
- How can you overcome your fear of movement?
- How can you retrain your body's pain response?
- How can you tackle your unique pain stressors and break the cycle?
- How can you build confidence in yourself and your body?
- How can you safely re-engage in life's everyday activities with balance and respect for your body?

The following documentary gives you a deeper understanding of John Sarno's work:

<https://www.amazon.com/All-Rage-Saved-Sarno-John/dp/B07NYCXH7V>

For more information or for assistance in your journey out of chronic pain, visit my website at www.alignedfit.com or contact Lisa Decker at 408-691-2829 or lisabethdecker@gmail.com.