

# Can you train your brain to beat chronic pain?

As Kirsty Young opens up about her experience, a top neuroscientist explains how the mind is key to pain management

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Chronic pain affects 43 per cent of UK adults to some degree

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The broadcaster Kirsty Young spoke frankly this week about her experience of fibromyalgia — the long-term condition that causes pain all over the body — which left her feeling “hollowed out ... sometimes sobbing with pain”. She stepped down from her dream job at the helm of *Desert Island Discs* in 2019. “I coped badly. I coped in the way that many people do with chronic long-term pain, which is you start thinking, ‘This will go away, I’ll take a couple of paracetamol. Actually, I think I need Nurofen Plus. Actually, I think I probably need to take three or four doses of those a day. Oh they seem not to be working, is it all in my head?’”

Her comments come as more than 5,000 pain professionals from around the world met in Amsterdam to discuss what has been dubbed a global epidemic. Chronic pain is cited as one of the main reasons behind the record 2.8 million people out of work due to long-term sickness in the UK. According to the British Pain Society, it affects 43 per cent of adults to some degree.

- [\*\*Kirsty Young: Medic snorted at my claim of chronic pain syndrome\*\*](#)

“It would be to the advantage of the overstretched health service to take [them] seriously and not just palm them off with either a great big pack of painkillers or some heavy antidepressants,” says Young, 55, recalling being made to feel like “a crazy lady” by a female medic when trying to get a diagnosis.



Kirsty Young spoke frankly this week about her experience of fibromyalgia  
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“Chronic pain is the world’s most disabling health condition,” agrees Lorimer Moseley, an Australian neuroscientist and leading global pain expert. Chronic pain — from fibromyalgia to back and neck pain and headaches — is any pain that lasts beyond 12 weeks, or beyond the expected period of recovery after an injury.

Moseley himself experienced almost a decade of persistent back and shoulder pain after a series of football injuries and has since spent 25 years researching the subject. Most methods of treatment simply “don’t work”, he says, as medics are only just beginning to fully understand the role of the mind.

This is not to say that it’s all in sufferers’ heads. “Absolutely not,” says Moseley, who founded Pain Revolution, an organisation dedicated to spreading cutting-edge pain science. “Chronic pain is no different to any other kind of pain in so far as it’s in your consciousness, you feel it, it’s completely 100 per cent real — but the very best treatment is first understanding how pain works.”

Pain is not just a sensory signal, indicating physical damage, but a protective one. “Pain is not about telling you exactly what’s happening; it’s about telling you what the risk of this situation is likely to be, and if it’s [perceived] to be more risky, then the brain will make more pain,” Moseley says.

Multiple lab studies have shown this perception of risk can be exaggerated and distorted, causing the pain system to remain activated and highly sensitised. Moseley cites one experiment in which a piece of metal was pressed onto the back of participants’ hands, with red and blue lights periodically flashing. When the light turned red — a colour associated with danger and heat — pain ratings were up to twice as high as when the blue light showed.

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This chimes with Young’s experience. “Fibromyalgia, in its simplest explanation, is what’s called a neuropathic pain disorder — so the pain centre in the brain, which everybody has, gets thrown off,” she says. “Things that you normally would not feel or notice become entirely magnified by the fact that your pain centre is overinterpreting things that would happen normally in your body.”

Chronic pain management will differ from person to person, but Moseley maintains that challenging your beliefs about your condition, being willing to pursue treatment other than medication and surgery, and expanding your existing movement thresholds can help most people to lead a pain-free life. “The exciting thing is that once you understand [pain] better, you can slowly start to negotiate your way towards recovery.” Here’s what he believes can help.

## Reframe the way you think about pain

“Most people with chronic back pain believe they have a very fragile, vulnerable and about-to-be-broken back, and for most people with chronic back pain that’s not

the case at all,” Moseley explains. “You’ve got to train your brain to accept that your back is stronger than it feels it is.”

He suggests consulting online resources such as Flippin’ Pain ([flippinpain.co.uk](http://flippinpain.co.uk)), which aims to make sense of the science and make it plain that hurt does not always equal harm and recovery is possible. After reading up, he advises taking the information to your GP or physio, and telling them: “‘I want you to teach me how to recover.’ That’s a totally different question from, ‘I want you to give me something that will relieve my pain.’”