PATIENT INFORMATION · OSTEO+

Understanding pain

Pain is real. And it does not automatically mean damage.

PUTTING PAIN IN CONTEXT	**Pain is a real, personal protective signal. It deserves attention – but it is not always a reliable measure of current tissue damage.**

Pain helps us notice possible danger, pause and protect our body. How strongly we experience it depends on more than signals from the body. Experiences, expectations, stress, sleep and our social environment can also influence the protective system. This does not mean that symptoms are “imagined” – it means that pain is complex and can change.

01 THE SMOKE ALARM

An alarm does not automatically mean damage.



The smoke alarm metaphor: a sensitive alarm system can respond to stimuli that are normally harmless. Supplied illustration.

A smoke alarm is important because it should sound quickly when there is a real fire. But it can also go off because of burnt toast or steam. The sound is real and prompts us to take a look. Yet it does not automatically prove that a fire has started.

Pain works in a similar way. After an injury, with ongoing symptoms, poor sleep, stress or distressing experiences, the alarm system can become more alert. It then reacts more quickly or more strongly. This is not imagined, and it is not about blame – it is an understandable protective response of the nervous system.

KEY POINT	**An alarm matters. But the strength of an alarm and the extent of damage are not the same thing.**

02 THE COLA IMAGE

The brain makes sense of incomplete information.



FULL IMAGE



DETAIL: ORIGINAL COLOURS – TURQUOISE BEHIND BLACK AND WHITE STRIPES

Left: the complete cola image. Right: the greatly enlarged original view shows turquoise parts of the image behind black and white stripes – not a red can. Supplied and edited illustration.

LOOK CLOSELY	**At first glance, many people see a red cola can. Look at the large close-up: you can see turquoise parts of the image and black and white stripes – not a red can.**

Our brain automatically fills in a familiar, coloured can, drawing on what seems plausible from experience, memory and context. Signals from the body are often ambiguous too: pressure, pulling, tension or a stabbing sensation can have different meanings.

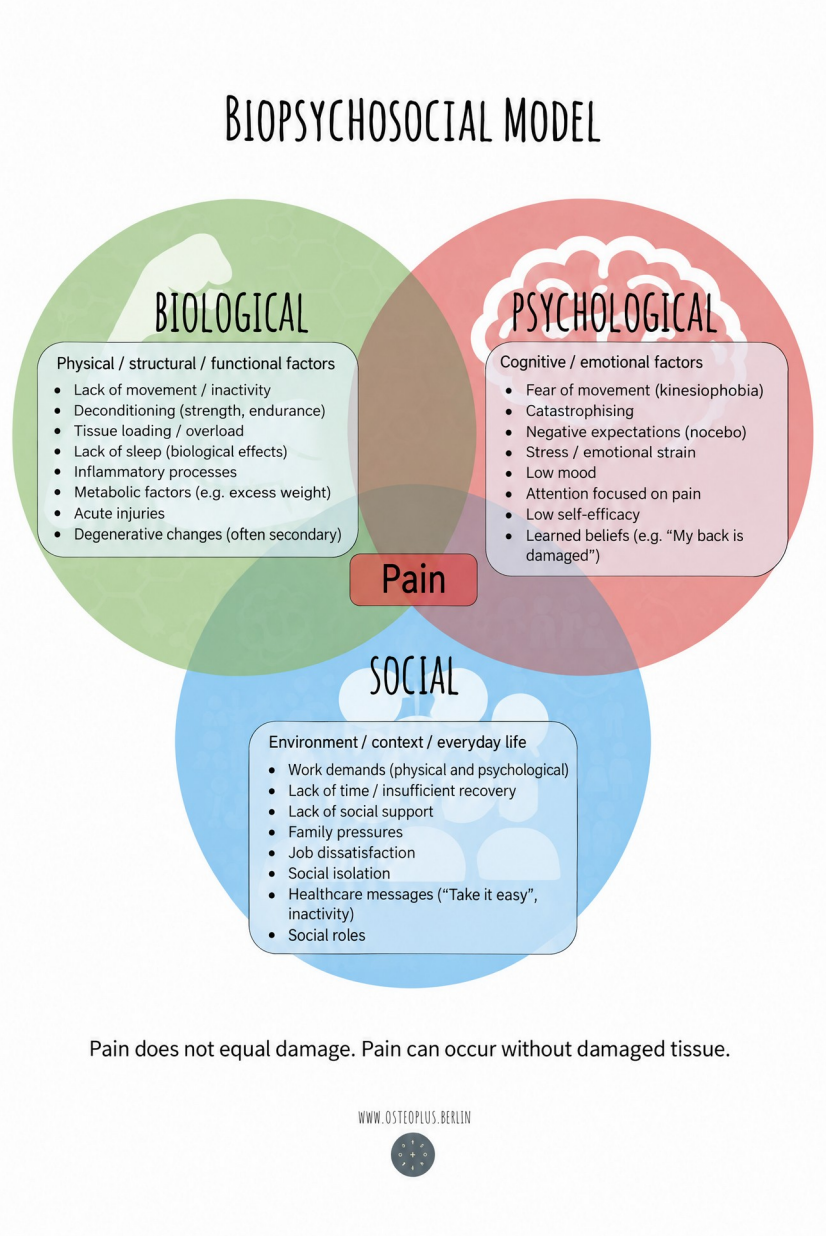
The nervous system combines signals from the body with the current situation, past experiences, expectations and a sense of safety or danger. When the overall situation feels threatening, pain can arise as a protective signal or become stronger.

Pain and the processing of potentially damaging stimuli are not the same thing. Pain is not produced at will, and it is always a personal, real experience.

What the body tells us	What the nervous system makes of it
Signals from muscles, joints, nerves and other tissues provide important information – but they are not always clear-cut.	Experiences, expectations, sleep, stress and context can influence how much protection a situation is judged to need.

03 THE BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL MODEL

Several influences interact.



The biopsychosocial model. Based on the supplied PDF illustration.

Pain does not arise from just one area. Physical, psychological and social factors interact. This model is not a checklist or a statement about who is "to blame". It is a useful map: if several factors can influence pain, there are often several ways to build a greater sense of safety, increase your capacity for activity and take part in life.

Body & biology	Thoughts & feelings	Daily life & environment
Injury, inflammation, physical load, inactivity, sleep and physical recovery.	Stress, worries, expectations, past experiences and self-confidence.	Work, time pressure, family, support and opportunities to recover.

04 SELF-EFFICACY

What can support your alarm system?

This is not about ignoring warning signals or forcing yourself through pain. It is about gradually experiencing your body and nervous system as able to cope again. The right approach is individual and is adapted to your symptoms, assessment findings, goals and daily life.

Exercise tailored to you	Targeted treatment	Build a sense of safety
A well-paced exercise programme creates positive experiences of movement and can rebuild confidence in your ability to cope with activity.	When clinically appropriate, techniques such as manual therapy or dry needling can temporarily make symptoms easier to manage.	Breaks, sleep, managing stress and support in daily life are important resources for the protective system.

Active strategies and an individually designed exercise programme are central. Manual techniques or dry needling can – when appropriate after an assessment and a shared decision – create a helpful window: movement often becomes easier, positive experiences become possible and the nervous system can judge the situation to be safer again. The goal is not a passive “repair”, but greater self-efficacy, confidence and capacity for activity in daily life.

WORKING TOGETHER	**Not every change suits every person. The key question is: what is making your alarm louder right now – and what helps your system feel safer?**

05 THE ESSENTIALS

Three take-home messages

Pain is real	Pain does not equal damage	There is more than one way forward
It is a personal protective signal, not a sign of weakness.	Stronger pain does not automatically mean that the body has suffered more damage.	Understanding pain, appropriate movement, recovery and support can help you feel safer and take part in life.

We see the body not as a machine that needs repairing, but as a complex system. That is why we focus on a thorough assessment, individual treatment and clear explanations. Our aim is to reduce fear, strengthen self-efficacy and work together to find a suitable path towards more movement and confidence in your own body.

More about understanding pain

www.osteoplus.berlin

Clinical basis: International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP), pain definition and pain terminology. www.iasp-pain.org/resources/terminology/ | Image credits: smoke alarm and cola image: supplied image files. Biopsychosocial model: supplied PDF file.