Break Free from Chronic Pain with Pain Reprocessing Therapy

Led by Erin Lewyk

Client Booklet

PARKWAY
PHYSIOTHERAPY + PERFORMANCE CENTRE

INTRODUCTION

Pain Reprocessing Therapy (PRT)

Offered by Erin Lewyk, Registered Clinical Counsellor and certified Pain Reprocessing Therapist

For those suffering from chronic pain and who have tried everything without long-term relief…there is hope.

PRT helps you:

- Understand how pain works
- Learn how our brain can misinterpret safe signals as dangerous
- Rewire your brain's response to pain
- Break the pain-fear cycle
- Build confidence, trust, and safety in your body again
- Reduce or eliminate pain
- Get back to living the life you want to live

The goal is not just temporary relief but a lasting change that can help you live pain-free.

My name is Erin Lewyk and I am so glad you're here. If you've signed up for this 8-week program, it means you're ready to explore new ways to understand, reduce, and eliminate your chronic pain. This booklet is your companion on your journey - a blend of science, strategies, and a whole lot of hope.



What You Can Expect

Throughout our eight 50-minute sessions together, we'll explore different PRT tools and ideas:

- Assessing for neuroplastic pain
- Understanding the science of pain (psychoeducation)
- Learning about the fear-pain cycle
- Somatic tracking (mindfulness, safety reassurance, leaning into positive sensations)
- Building a sense of safety in your body
- Emotional regulation and expression
- Facing avoided movements with more confidence
- Letting go of perfectionism, self-criticism, and control
- Working with anxious thoughts & anxiety
- Learning about nervous system regulation
- Preparing a plan for flare-ups or setbacks
- Creating your own healing path forward

**Clients may not require all eight sessions, and some clients might want additional sessions beyond the 8-week program. For this reason, sessions will be paid individually after each appointment.*

What Is Pain Reprocessing Therapy (PRT)?

Pain Reprocessing Therapy (PRT) is an evidence-based, mind-body approach that helps individuals reduce or eliminate chronic pain by retraining the brain. Yes - you read that right. PRT is based on the understanding and research that indicate many chronic pain conditions are not caused by ongoing physical or structural damage, but rather by the brain misinterpreting safe signals from the body as if they were dangerous (Apkarian et al., 2009; Castro et al., 2001). The good news? The brain can learn new patterns.

Consider that 64% of people with NO back pain have disc bulges, protrusions, herniations, or disc degeneration (Jensen et al.,1994; Kleinstück et al., 2006). Just like we get gray hairs as we age, there is normal wear and tear associated with aging that does not mean we will experience pain.

So, if structural abnormalities are not responsible for most cases of chronic pain, what is?

A study by Baliki et al. (2012) at Northwestern University found that it was possible to predict with 85% accuracy which patients with an initial episode of back pain would develop chronic back pain, based solely on brain scans. They found that certain areas of the brain had developed learned neural pathways. This type of pain is referred to as neuroplastic pain.



What is Pain?

Pain = Danger Signal

As uncomfortable as pain is, we need pain to survive. For example, when we put our hand on a hot stove, we rely on our brain to interpret the signals it receives from our hand to pull away and protect us from further tissue damage. Those born with a rare condition where they cannot feel pain at all often have shorter life spans, as they cannot detect when they are injured or hurt; their internal alarm system is broken.

When our internal alarm system is functioning properly, the sensory receptors in our skin send messages via the spinal cord to the brain, where the brain interprets the signals received. What is important to know is that all pain is created in the brain, not in your stubbed toe! Pain is a "complex, protective output that your brain creates based on multiple inputs and interpretations" (DC Metro Therapy, 2025, para 17).

Your brain's primary job is to keep you safe, and as amazing as our brains are, they can make mistakes, and they can misinterpret safe signals from the body as if they're dangerous.

Chronic pain often comes from a case of mistaken identity: your brain misreads normal sensations as threats. It's like your alarm system keeps going off even though there's no fire. When your brain perceives danger (whether physical, emotional, or social), it can create pain as a protective mechanism (DC Metro Therapy, 2025).

This is called neuroplastic pain, and it's driven by fear, attention, and meaning. The more we fear the pain or obsess over it, the louder the brain screams, and the more we feel pain.

A study by Bayer et al. (1991) connected participants to a machine with electrodes on their heads and told them that they were receiving an electrical current, which was intended to cause a temporary headache. In reality, the machine did nothing. However, half the participants reported a headache, demonstrating that the mere belief of physical damage can trigger pain!

All Pain is Real Pain.

But as you are learning, not all pain comes from injury. When the brain thinks something is dangerous, it can create pain, even when there's no physical damage.

But why would are brains misinterpret safe signals as dangerous?



Pain = Sensation + Fear. Fear is What Fuels the Pain.

All those experiencing chronic pain share the same fear that "there must be something wrong with my body", and when the brain believes there is damage, it responds with pain. Fear of pain includes frustration, anxiety, annoyance, irritation, despair, anguish, distress, dismay, and anything else that puts you in high alert mode. All of these feelings are danger signals that keep your brain **stuck in a state of fear, which generates pain.**

Additionally, invalidation of your pain (by well-meaning doctors, friends, and family) can actually perpetuate your pain (DC Metro, 2025). Knowing that you are not broken and that your brain is misfiring pain signals due to learned patterns, trauma, or stress does not make your experience less valid. **Your pain experience is real, and it matters.**



The Pain-Fear Cycle

Here's how the pain-fear cycle usually goes:

1. Pain triggers feelings of fear (it'll get worse/won't get better).
2. Fear reinforces that the pain is dangerous.
3. More pain leads to more fear.
4. More fear leads to more pain.

Rinse and repeat. It's a loop. A very loud, very convincing loop that can persist for months to many years.

PRT helps you step out of this cycle. You'll learn to approach sensations with curiosity instead of fear, to gently re-engage with life, and to show your brain that your body is safe. Instead of misinterpreting sensations from the body as if they were dangerous, this work teaches you how to develop new neural pathways and create a new relationship with the sensations you feel. The sensations are safe.

What is it like to embrace a different belief? A belief that your brain is making a mistake and that there is nothing physically wrong with your body? This new belief can instill hope, decrease fear, and reduce or eliminate pain.

Why Does Pain Start?

Neuroplastic pain can begin in **any of** the following ways:

- Initial Injury
- Perceived Injury
- Stressful Situation
- Gradual Onset

Reflections

What was going on in your life at the time you started experiencing pain?

During our sessions, we will explore the origins of your pain and gain a thorough understanding of your unique pain story.

It's also important to mention that there are three common sources that perpetuate fear and the pain-fear cycle: **worry, pressure, and self-criticism**.

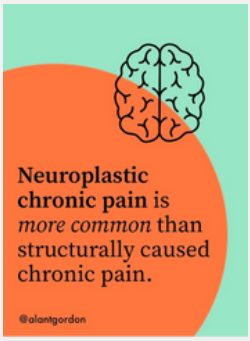
In what ways do worry, pressure, and self-criticism show up in my life and how I relate to myself?

Is My Pain Neuroplastic Pain?

It is essential that we assess for neuroplastic pain and rule out any physical or structural issues. Our work will begin with an assessment during our initial session, and we will continue to rule in and collect evidence of neuroplastic pain throughout treatment.

If we are unsure, a thorough examination should be conducted by a doctor first.

Even though PRT is designed to work with those experiencing neuroplastic pain, this type of therapy can also benefit those who have structural conditions or damage. PRT is not a panacea or a cure-all in these cases, however, as pain is a danger signal that can be activated by physical damage, this type of treatment can help cultivate a new way to relate to the pain by understanding that our past trauma, stress, difficult emotions, and how our brains our wired can contribute to how pain is experienced. With physical concerns, PRT also aims to increase one's agency, empowerment, and connection to oneself and others.



Assessment

Here are a few criteria that we will use to explore if your pain might be neuroplastic:

- The pain spreads/moves around, changes locations, or intensity
- You have multiple symptoms and more than two unrelated conditions
- Medical tests/MRIs/scans are normal or inconclusive
- The pain flares up with stress or difficult emotions
- It started during a stressful time (even if it was "positive stress" like a new baby or getting married)
- It improves when you're relaxed, distracted, or doing enjoyable activities
- Pain with delayed onset after completing an activity

If this sounds familiar, you're not broken, and you likely have neuroplastic pain. This is actually good news, as it is easier to treat than a physical condition. Your brain is just being a bit overprotective, and we can work with that.

Additionally, your pain may have neuroplastic components, and PRT can still be beneficial in this context as well.

But I have a medical diagnosis!

That's OK! Many do! Doctors are trained to look for structural problems so they can be fixed. The bio-medical model is absolutely beneficial when dealing with an injury or serious health condition. A diagnosis can feel comforting; however, it reinforces that something is wrong with your body, even if there isn't.

With chronic pain, the bio-medical model can often make things worse. "When you have a hammer, all you see is nails". Often, the problems found do not line up with the symptoms.

But there is a structural cause for my pain.

That's OK too! Although PRT is designed to work with neuroplastic pain, it can help individuals reclaim aspects of life if there is an underlying physical or structural factor contributing to pain. PRT cannot cure or promise recovery in these situations, but PRT can provide relief by teaching you how to develop a new relationship with the pain, the anxiety often associated with the physical concern, and with yourself.

Using PRT interventions, individuals discover that healing isn't just about eliminating pain but about cultivating strength and peace amidst challenges, fostering a journey towards greater emotional well-being and resilience.

Reflection:

How do my symptoms and experience meet the criteria that I have neuroplastic pain? Look for exceptions when your pain behaves differently than if it were a physical problem. This is you gathering your own evidence list!

Common Personality Traits

The following personality traits are often associated with those who experience chronic pain:

- Perfectionism
- Conscientiousness
- People Pleasing
- Anxiousness

But Why?

Consider how these traits align with stress, pressure, overcommitment, high standards, emotional strain, and neglecting one's own needs and boundaries. All of these contribute to keeping us on high alert and indicate danger to our nervous system. Danger is a threat, and our brain can interpret these threats as pain!

Reflection:

How does perfectionism, conscientiousness, people-pleasing and/or anxiety impact my life?

Emotions and the Body – More Connected Than You Think

Emotions are not inherently dangerous, but if you learned that you could not express certain emotions (such as sadness or anger), you may think these emotions aren't safe. Some people can even feel that joy feels dangerous.

When this happens, it is common for individuals to avoid certain emotions that evoke feelings of danger. When we don't fully process emotions like fear, grief, and anger, they can get "stuck," and sometimes show up as physical symptoms. We can even learn that conflict or intimacy can feel dangerous as well.

Emotions are also a physical experience and show up in the body, and in our work together, we will explore how emotions feel in your body and learn to feel them through a lens of safety. For example, have you ever experienced a stomach-ache before a big event? Or tight shoulders during a stressful week? This is emotion being experienced in your body.

PRT helps you tune in, name what's going on, and gently feel and be with all emotions, teaching you that all emotions are objectively safe. It's not always easy, but it's freeing and healing, and we explore any unwanted sensations and difficult emotions at your pace.

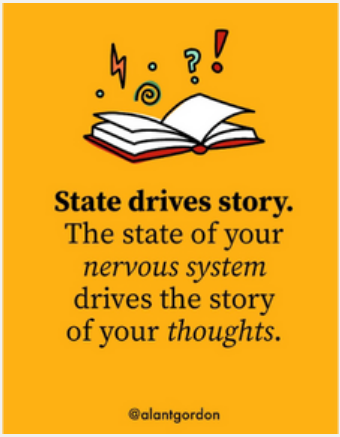
How Trauma Can Show Up as Pain

In addition, traumatic experiences, including adverse childhood experiences, have been shown to contribute to our relationship with fear, which can affect the way we experience pain (Lumley et al., 2022).

Past trauma can shape how the brain responds to stress and sensation. If you've had painful experiences (medical, emotional, or physical), your brain might have learned to stay on high alert. That vigilance can keep your nervous system in a state of tension (fight/flight/freeze), making pain more likely. It isn't about **telling** your brain that you are safe, it is about **showing** your brain that you are safe by experiencing it and learning how to practice existing in this state of ease, calm, and safety.

In this program, we gently explore how your story may be connected to your symptoms - not to relive the past, but to rewrite the present. You are safe now. And your brain can learn that, too. As a trauma-trained therapist, I will ensure you learn coping skills so that you learn to process distressing memories or emotions and regulate your nervous system along the way.

Oftentimes, those with chronic pain get stuck in a fight, flight, or freeze mode (all adaptive trauma responses), which may be keeping your brain in a state of fear. This is about widening your "window of tolerance"; the optimal zone where you feel calm, regulated, connected, grounded, and centered.



PRT Interventions for Neuroplastic Pain

Somatic Tracking
Somatic tracking is a form of gentle exposure therapy that helps train the brain by developing new neural pathways through exposure to fear-inducing stimuli. By learning to attend to the pain without fear, the pain loses its fuel source. (Remember, pain = sensation + fear).

There are three main components to somatic tracking that I will incorporate into our work together. They are **mindfulness, safety reappraisal, and positive affect induction**.

Mindfulness is simply paying attention, on purpose, without judgment. You will learn to be with and observe your physical sensations from a place of curiosity and interest instead of fear.

Safety reappraisal is about teaching your brain that you are safe and that there is nothing physically wrong with your body, just your brain making a mistake. Pain is your brain's opinion of what is going on in your body, and many of us have very opinionated brains!

Positive affect induction involves adopting a lighthearted, humorous, and/or playful approach to your experience. Many individuals with chronic pain can be intense, preoccupied, hyper-focused, and in "hawk-mode" toward their symptoms (and towards life), and this is about learning to view your sensations through a lens of safety. This also involves using relaxing imagery and visualization.

Somatic tracking is brain retraining. It will help you form new neural pathways in your brain and develop a new relationship to your bodily sensations. This is not about fixing or pushing sensations away; it's about being with your symptoms in a new way.

In our work together, we can use somatic tracking both when you are stationary and when appropriate, particularly when you are engaged in movements that evoke fear, to create corrective experiences.

Reflections:
In what ways could my mindset be keeping me stuck in fear-mode?

Leaning into Positive Sensations

You will learn to attend to sensations that feel good, such as the breath, sunshine on your skin, stretching, or other enjoyable stimuli, as pain tends to decrease when engaged in pleasant things.

Self-Compassion & Self-Care

You can use all the tools and have all the information, but neglecting to treat yourself with kindness along the way will limit your recovery.

Our work together will include exploring your relationship with you and developing a patient, caring, and compassionate approach to how you relate to yourself. It is important to understand and appreciate the link between how we treat ourselves and the perpetuation of pain.

It is common to think that self-compassion is self-pity, selfish, self-indulgent, or will make you lazy or unmotivated. I am here to dispel these myths and demonstrate that they have been backed up by science.

Self-compassion supports healing from shame and self-criticism, which may be useful for those with chronic pain (Edwards et al., 2019).

Journaling

Journaling is a powerful tool in PRT. Why?

- It helps you notice patterns
- It gives your emotions a voice
- It makes your thoughts visible and easier to reframe
- It creates space between you and the pain story

You don't need to be a "good writer." Just honest. Curious. Open. Your journal is a space for truth, tenderness, and transformation.

Recovery Maintenance

In many pain patients, just as fear and symptoms decrease, they experience a spike of intense pain; this is called an extinction burst. Extinction bursts are a common phenomenon, as reinforced behaviours do not give up easily. It's similar to a toddler having a tantrum when they don't get what they want. This can be a positive sign, as bursts typically occur only during extinction.

As you get better, it's important to know this in advance so that you stay committed to the process, knowing that the burst will pass.

CONCLUSION

Final Notes – Your Brain Is Amazing (And So Are You)

Chronic pain can be isolating. But you're not alone - and you're not stuck. Your brain is plastic (that's a good thing!) and capable of incredible change.

The brain's role in chronic pain doesn't diminish your experience. Instead, it offers hope. If your brain learned to create pain patterns in response to invalidation and perceived danger, it can also learn new patterns of safety and healing. Your pain is real, your experience matters, and with the right support and understanding, healing is possible.

You're here because you're brave. Keep showing up, keep practicing, and keep being curious. Your brain is listening, and it's ready to learn a new story.

It makes sense that it can feel scary to get your hopes up. You have tried everything to fix your pain. I'm sure you have doubts, and I'm sure part of you is skeptical, and that's totally OK. All I am asking is that you remain open and willing to explore a new way of relating to your pain.

Welcome to your path to feeling better and learning to trust your body again. I'm excited to be on this healing journey with you.



Here is a space to write down any questions or insights as we progress through the program.

Resources

Podcasts

- Like Mind Like Body (Curable) - Christie Uipi, LCSW
- The Cure for Chronic Pain - Nicole Sachs, LCSW
- The Pain Reprocessing Therapy Podcast – Daniella Deutsch and John Gasienica
- Tell Me About Your Pain (Curable) – Alan Gordon and Alon Ziv

Websites (with free resources like blogs, articles, videos)

- Break Awake - https://www.yourbreakawake.com/
- Boulder Institute for Mind Body Medicine - https://www.bouldermindbodymedicine.com
- Mbody Community - https://www.mbodycommunity.com/
- Pain Psychotherapy Canada - https://www.painpsychotherapy.ca

Books

- Gordon, A. (2021). The Way Out: A Revolutionary, Scientifically Proven Approach to Healing Chronic Pain. Avery.
- Sachs, N. (2025). Mind Your Body: A Revolutionary Program to Release Chronic Pain and Anxiety. Avery.
- Sarno, J. E. (1991). Healing Back Pain: The Mind:Body Connection. Balance.
- Schubiner, H. (2022). Unlearn Your Pain, 4th Ed. Mind Body Publishing, LLC.

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