

chapter 1

The Truth About Your Pain

Telling people about Mind Body Syndrome is like telling them that the earth is round, when they KNOW that it's flat!

— Anonymous patient

Vitiant artus aegrae contagia mentis.

(When the mind is ill at ease, the body is affected.) — Ovid

It hurts.

Your pain is awful. Your misery is unrelenting. No matter what you do, you can't get rid of it.

You went to your doctor, and he told you that you had a medical condition: degenerative disc disease, spinal stenosis, fibromyalgia, irritable bowel syndrome, whiplash, or something else. Your doctor prescribed drugs. You took them, but they didn't really help. Maybe you even had surgery, but that didn't stop the pain, whether it was in your back, your head, your neck, your gut, or all over.

Perhaps you have explored alternative medicine. Maybe you took herbal remedies, had therapeutic massages, or saw a chiropractor. You're considering acupuncture, hypnosis, and even crystals, if that might help. Some of these treatments may have provided temporary or partial relief, but still the pain is there, day after day after day. You've gone to so many health practitioners that you are starting to feel no one can help you because no one understands the real problem. Maybe your doctor even referred you to a psychiatrist or psychologist, suggesting that your pain isn't real—that it's all in your head.

But you know you're not imagining your pain. You're not faking it to gain attention or sympathy. It's about time someone in the medical profession recognized that the pain in your body is real. It's about time that someone in the medical profession told you that there is a reason for your pain and a way to cure it.

I am that doctor, and I'm telling you: Your pain is real, there is a reason for it, and there is a

cure for it. The only way to relieve the pain is to find the underlying cause of it, to get to the bottom of it. The problem is not in your head. It's in your diagnosis.

Some doctors may say you have a serious medical condition, but if they don't know how to cure it, their diagnosis doesn't help you. Perhaps alternative health practitioners will tell you that your spine is not properly aligned or your aura is out of whack or your chi is diminished. All of these are different ways of looking at your body, but none of them will succeed if they're not correctly diagnosing why your body hurts.

I have some good news for you. Unless you have a medical problem resulting in clear pathology in your body (which can be determined by routine medical tests), your pain can be cured. Following this program, you can take some relatively easy steps to vanquish it.

Like tens of millions of Americans and countless others around the globe who suffer from chronic back pain, muscle pain, headaches, migraines, stomach pain, and other misdiagnosed conditions, you're hurting because of overly sensitized nerve connections between the brain and the body. These connections have created a vicious cycle of pain that can last for months, years, or even decades unless you do what it takes to stop it. This cycle of pain signals has been "learned" by your nervous system—and the longer these signals keep firing, the more sensitized and overactive the nerves become, and the more pain you feel.

The event that started this horrible pain cycle could have been an injury or a stressful event in your life, or it could have come out of the blue. A very careful and detailed look at your current situation and your life history will reveal how your brain is amplifying this pain and perpetuating the vicious cycle.

The best news is that you don't have to live the rest of your life with this pain. Whether you've had it for a few weeks or for many years, it can be beaten. Just as your nervous system has learned to make your body hurt, you can use your brain to unlearn the pain. There's a way to retrain your brain so that your body isn't contorted into pain. This book will explain how this can be done without drugs or surgery, by anyone with the motivation to do so.

In fact, if you begin to understand this syndrome and recognize what causes it, you've already taken a powerful first step. And the rest of the steps, though they require wholehearted commitment, are not difficult. They are all explained in this book, and the whole program is laid out for you to work through. Improvement may occur within days or weeks, even if you've been suffering for a long time. And by doing the program you can get more than temporary or partial relief. You can achieve

complete freedom from the pain and distress that have hobbled you.

Starting today, you can break the connection between your nervous system and your physical pain. And you can start to use your mental energy to overcome your limitations and rebuild your life.

I know this is true because I have done it myself. I've changed my understanding of the source of my pain, and I can now prevent the stresses of everyday life from producing pain in my body. More importantly, I've seen the same transformation in hundreds of my patients.

This program is not risky or far out. It doesn't require belief in an alternative paradigm of medicine or philosophy. The work of unlearning your pain is based on solid science and common sense.

The Pathways of Pain

Pain begins when nerve pathways from the brain to the body are stimulated or “fired.” Over time, these pathways can become “wired” into the brain's circuitry. The nervous system learns to create chronic pain, even though there is no serious medical condition in the body, and even though any injury that may have precipitated the pain has long ago healed.

Everyone knows that if you break your arm, it will hurt, but after the fracture heals in a few weeks, the pain will disappear. But I have seen hundreds of people whose pain began with an injury but lasted five, ten, even twenty years. Why? The body has surely healed. The answer to this puzzle is found in the connections between the brain and the body.

Many people have heard about “phantom limb” pain, the pain that is felt in the area of an arm or a leg that has been amputated. There is clearly nothing wrong with that area—it isn't even there—yet this pain can be severe. We now know that this pain is caused by sensitized nerve connections and the creation of nerve pathways in the brain.

The good news is that the brain and the nervous system can be retrained to get out of the ruts that produce pain and to forge new nerve pathways to freedom from pain. An increasing body of evidence is showing that the brain has amazing neuroplasticity—it is always learning and creating new structural pathways. All you have to do is tap into that power and use it to reprogram your response to pain and to the factors that intensify that pain.

There are three major components of the nervous system that create the vicious cycle of pain: the nerves that send pain signals from the body to the brain; the brain itself, where those nerve signals are interpreted; and the nerves that send signals back to the body. The best way to end chronic

pain and other chronic symptoms is by retraining the brain, the controller of the nervous system. Most people don't realize that the brain can both create and cure chronic painful conditions, so they search for cures by using drugs or surgery that try to cover up the pain. Cutting-edge brain research demonstrates that it is possible to change the brain pathways and interrupt this vicious cycle.

Stress and Pain

Pain cannot be felt without the brain, which interprets nerve signals and transforms them into the experience of pain. Of course, it is important to be able to feel pain so we can protect ourselves from danger. However, these pathways often tend to get reinforced over time by our reactions to the pain. Just about everyone who has chronic pain will react to that pain with fear, anger, anxiety, frustration, and other worrisome thoughts and emotions. These thoughts and emotions trigger increased pain by an "amplification" process in the brain.

Thoughts and emotions, whether we are aware of them or whether they are subconscious, are major factors in producing chronic pain and related syndromes. In addition, the stress that frequently accompanies these symptoms, such as decreased activity, decreased income, and more difficult relationships, adds to the problem by making the stress-producing nerve pathways stronger.

In this kind of situation, your brain will continue to produce pain because that's the only way your brain knows how to deal with these stresses. The truth is that your mind can twist your body into a cycle of very real pain.

It is common for people with difficult emotional experiences in their childhood or their recent past to have this same amplification of pain. In fact, certain traumatic experiences in childhood leave an imprint on the brain, making it more likely to develop the vicious pain cycle. People who have a great deal of unresolved stress are also more likely to have chronic pain. Almost everyone has stress to some degree, and in many people it results, sooner or later, in chronic pain that can range from mild and intermittent to intense and unrelenting. And there are many symptoms in addition to pain that can be caused by these wayward connections, such as diarrhea, insomnia, ringing in the ears, fatigue, bladder symptoms, and anxiety. The term I use for this condition is Mind Body Syndrome, or MBS, and most people have some form of it.

What This Program Offers

In the chapters that follow, you will learn about MBS. You will see how it can develop and why modern medicine is typically unable to solve this problem. Most importantly, you'll learn whether you suffer from this syndrome. And finally you'll be guided through a comprehensive program to cure yourself.

As a benefit of this program, you will attain increased self-awareness and greater understanding of how your brain works and of what issues in your life may have contributed to your physical pain. Not only do I expect you to be able to cure your pain, but you will be a stronger, more confident, less anxious, and less vulnerable person.

Your pain is real. But you no longer have to put up with it. This book will show you how to heal yourself. The nerve pathways causing the pain can be retrained by understanding what triggers them and what amplifies them. In order to do this, we must look more closely at the brain and how it is affected by pain and by stress, and how it develops chronic pain pathways. In this way you will finally understand the underlying cause of your pain and begin to take the steps to unlearn your pain.