

The Body Remembers: Chronic Pain, Injury, and Mental Health



The Body Remembers

The body often carries what the mind cannot fully process. Chronic pain, injury, trauma, stress, and emotional wounds are deeply interconnected — and healing requires caring for the whole person: body, mind, relationships, and soul.

The Body and Pain

- Pain is not only physical.
 - Pain is neurological, emotional, relational, and sometimes spiritual.
- Survival Modes
 - Fight | Flight | Freeze
 - Shutdown
- Military environments train heightened alertness:
 - Scanning environments
 - Rapid reactions
 - Adrenaline dependence
 - Suppressing emotion for survival
- The problem:
- The body can struggle to “turn off” survival mode later.
- “The body remembers what the mind tries to move past.”
 - Trauma can increase inflammation and muscle tension
 - Anxiety can amplify physical pain
 - Chronic pain increases depression risk
 - Poor sleep worsens pain and emotional regulation
 - Isolation intensifies symptoms
- Common Chronic Symptoms
- Physical:
 - Headaches
 - Migraines
 - Back pain
 - Joint pain
 - Stomach/GI issues
 - Fatigue
 - Insomnia
- Emotional/Mental
 - Irritability
 - Hopelessness
 - Numbness
 - Panic
 - Emotional detachment
 - Concentration issues
- Important Distinction
- Pain may be real even when scans look “normal.”
 - Nervous system sensitization
 - Stored stress responses
 - The body staying on alert
- Avoid over-medicalizing while validating lived experience

Wounds and Identity

- “Who am I now?”
- Many injured veterans grieve:
 - Lost strength
 - Lost independence
 - Lost identity
 - Lost career capability
 - Lost purpose
 - Lost brotherhood/community
- Common Internal Narratives
 - “I should be tougher.”
 - “Other people have it worse.”
 - “I don’t want to burden anyone.”
 - “Nobody understands.”
 - “I used to be useful.”
 - “I’m angry all the time.”
- Shame often keeps people silent.
- Identity & Pain
- Chronic pain changes:
 - Sleep
 - Energy
 - Personality
 - Relationships
 - Intimacy
 - Patience
 - Confidence
- Pain often becomes emotionally exhausting because it never fully “clocks out.”
- The strongest people are often the ones least likely to ask for help.
- 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God."

Tools

- **Practical Tool #1 — Body Awareness Check-In**
- Take a simple pause:
- Ask:
 - What is my body feeling right now?
 - Where am I carrying tension?
 - Am I exhausted, anxious, angry, numb, or overwhelmed?
- Many veterans are trained to override body signals.
- Healing often begins with awareness.
- **Practical Tool #2 — Controlled Breathing**
- Inhale 4 seconds
- Hold 4 seconds
- Exhale 6 seconds
- Still 4 seconds
- Longer exhales help calm the nervous system.
- **Practical Tool #3 — Movement**
- Walking
- Stretching
- Mobility work
- Low-impact exercise
- Sunlight exposure
- Movement communicates safety to the body.

Tools cont.

- **Practical Tool #4 — Connection**

- Isolation intensifies suffering.
- Try:
 - Trusted conversations
 - Peer groups
 - Veteran support communities
 - Counseling
 - Chaplain support
 - Honest friendships

- **Practical Tool #5 — Sleep Protection**

- Sleep hygiene
- Reducing stimulants late
- Reducing doom scrolling
- Calming routines
- Consistent sleep schedules
- Sleep affects:
 - Pain tolerance
 - Emotional regulation
 - Inflammation
 - Mental resilience

- **Practical Tool #6 — Meaning & Purpose**

- Pain becomes heavier when life loses meaning.
- Encourage:
 - Mentoring younger veterans
 - Volunteering
 - Faith/community involvement
 - Purposeful routines
 - Serving others carefully without burnout

- **Practical Tool #7 — Repair Relationships**

- Chronic pain affects:
 - Marriages
 - Parenting
 - Friendships
 - Work environments
 - Emotional availability
 - Loved ones may misinterpret:
 - Withdrawal
 - Irritability
 - Numbness
 - Exhaustion
- Encourage Honest Communication
- Simple language helps:
 - “I’m overwhelmed.”
 - “My pain level is high today.”
 - “I need quiet.”
 - “I’m struggling emotionally.”
 - “I don’t need fixing right now; I need support.”