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Pain Reprocessing Therapy

A Guide to Healing Neuroplastic Pain and Persistent Symptoms

What Is Pain Reprocessing Therapy?

Pain Reprocessing Therapy (PRT) is an evidence-based psychological treatment developed by Alan Gordon, LCSW, and researched at the University of Colorado Boulder. It is designed to help people recover from chronic pain and other persistent physical symptoms by changing how the brain perceives and processes sensations.

A landmark 2022 randomized controlled trial published in JAMA Psychiatry found that 66% of PRT participants were pain-free or nearly pain-free at the end of four weeks of treatment, compared to 20% in the placebo group. These gains were maintained at one-year follow-up and largely maintained at five-year follow-up.

The Foundation: Pain Is Generated by the Brain

All pain is real, and all pain is created by the brain. Pain is not based solely on signals from the body; it is a protective output produced by the brain based on its assessment of danger. When the brain learns to perceive danger, it can generate chronic pain that persists long after an injury has healed or even in the absence of injury.

This kind of pain is called neuroplastic. It is not imaginary. It is just as real as pain from an injury and can be as – or more – painful. It is real pain produced by a nervous system that has become sensitized, and it can be unlearned.

Core Principles of PRT

1. Your pain is neuroplastic — and therefore reversible.

The brain can learn pain, and the brain can unlearn it. Because chronic neuroplastic pain is a product of neural pathways — not structural damage — those pathways can change. Recovery is possible. Knowing this is the first step to perceiving your pain differently.

2. Safety is the antidote to chronic pain.

Chronic pain is maintained by the brain's ongoing perception of danger. When the brain receives consistent messages that the body is safe, pain signals can quiet down. PRT works by helping people generate a genuine, embodied sense of safety. This requires authentic reassurance grounded in evidence.

3. Fear amplifies pain; curiosity calms it.

Fear and anxiety about pain reinforce the brain's danger signal, increasing both the intensity and persistence of symptoms. In PRT, we shift from bracing and catastrophizing to approaching sensations with open, non-judgmental curiosity. This shift itself is medicine.

4. Emotions and stress contribute to symptoms — and addressing them is part of recovery.

Suppressed or unacknowledged emotions, including stress, grief, anger, shame, and fear, can activate the nervous system's danger response. PRT creates space to notice and feel emotions safely, which reduces the physiological burden that can show up as physical symptoms.

5. Evidence gathering helps retrain the brain.

One of the most powerful tools in PRT is consciously noticing evidence that your body is safe and capable. Pain that moves, fluctuates, or responds to context is evidence of neuroplasticity, not structural damage. Gathering this evidence helps the brain update its threat assessment.

6. Recovery is not about willpower — it involves self-compassion and removing pressure.

You did not create your pain through weakness, and recovery does not require forcing yourself to feel better. PRT is a gentle, gradual process of building new neural pathways, one moment of safety at a time. Self-compassion is not just encouraged; it is a clinical ingredient. This process cannot be rushed and doesn't work well if there is pressure to recover quickly.

Key PRT Practices

Somatic Tracking: Turning gentle, curious attention toward physical sensations to reduce the fear response and allow the nervous system to settle.

Positive Affect Induction: Intentionally evoking positive emotions, including joy, love, humor, gratitude, and awe. Positive emotions shift the brain's state and allow a greater sense of safety.

Corrective Messages: Speaking directly to the brain and the body with reassurance grounded in evidence. Not affirmations, but genuine messages of safety based on real information.

Expressive Work: Allowing emotions that have been pushed down, especially difficult ones like anger, sadness, or fear, to be felt and expressed. Releasing suppressed emotions releases tension and stress in the nervous system.

What PRT Is Not

PRT does not ask you to deny your pain, push through it, or pretend to feel better than you do. It does not imply that your pain is your fault. It does not require you to abandon any necessary medical care or dismiss the very real suffering you have experienced.

PRT says: your pain is real, your brain learned it, and your brain can learn something different. That is not a small thing. That is, for many people, life-changing.

A Note for Body Wise Parent Readers

If you are a parent navigating chronic pain or other persistent symptoms, know that your healing matters, for yourself and for your children. A regulated, recovering nervous system is one of the greatest gifts we can offer the next generation. You are not broken. You are learning.

This handout is for educational purposes and is not a substitute for individualized medical or psychological care. To learn more, visit BodyWiseParent.Substack.com or reach out to Meri Levy, LMFT at meri@merilevymft.com.