



HEALING CHRONIC SYMPTOMS (THE NEUROPLASTIC WAY): HOW TO GET STARTED

You're most likely here because you're living with chronic symptoms and recently learnt about the neuroplastic (or 'mind-body') approach to recovery. Firstly, please know you have our deepest empathy: we have been in your shoes and know how hard this experience is.

If you want to learn more about the neuroplastic approach, you're in the right place. Here we provide a brief summary of this approach to healing chronic symptoms – and we signpost you to places where you can discover more and start applying your learning to your symptoms.

What are neuroplastic symptoms?

Most of us assume that pain and symptoms felt in our bodies are caused by structural damage or disease, but the brain can also generate symptoms in response to psycho-social and emotional stress and 'threats'.

It is estimated that [40% of primary care visits](#) are for chronic unexplained symptoms such as, persistent pain, fatigue, dizziness, digestive issues - and many more.

Chronic symptoms like these can occur when the brain learns to produce pain/symptoms in response to stress, emotions, overwhelm and trauma. Symptoms of this type are often referred to as 'neuroplastic' or 'mind-body'. They occur when the nervous system gets stuck in threat mode (fight-flight-freeze) – and they are kept alive by learnt nerve pathways in the brain rather than ongoing physical damage.

The good news is that, because the brain and nervous system are changeable (or 'plastic'), these patterns can be unlearnt. Symptoms can improve or even resolve using a 'neuroplastic' approach that addresses their root causes: chronic stress, repressed emotions, trauma and nervous system dysregulation.

*This approach is not intended to treat conditions that have clear diagnostic tests, such as multiple sclerosis, diabetes, heart conditions, organ damage or failure, rheumatoid arthritis, cancers, or infections. Please consult your doctor to rule out definite structural causes to your symptoms before embarking on the neuroplastic approach.

How do I know if my symptoms are neuroplastic?

Physical causes for symptoms should always be ruled out with your doctors before you consider other explanations*.

If symptoms are not well explained by tests and do not respond as expected to conventional medical treatments, you may find it useful to use a self-assessment resource to 'rule in' the mind-body connection. This helps you explore the links between stress and your symptoms – and whether your symptoms behave in ways that are consistent with a neuroplastic explanation (rather than a structural one).

- [12-question quiz](#) from the Association for the Treatment of Neuroplastic Symptoms (ATNS)
- Living Proof's [self-assessment quiz](#)
- 'FIT' criteria in Dr Schubiner's book, [Unlearn Your Pain](#)
- Check list in Alan Gordon, LCSW's book, [The Way Out](#)

How can I treat my symptoms using the neuroplastic approach?

There isn't a universal road map to healing neuroplastic symptoms as this requires us to listen in to our own unique nervous system, understand why it's stuck in threat mode and respond in ways that reduce the danger level in the brain. However, there are common steps that many of us need to take on this journey:

1. **Learning about the neuroscience behind chronic symptoms:** once we understand deeply that symptoms do not relate to physical harm in the body, we begin to unwind the threat response.
2. **Soothing and regulating the nervous system** using mind-body tools and techniques that support a felt sense of safety in the body (examples: breathwork, progressive relaxation, mindfulness meditation, somatic practices such as orienting and grounding, gentle movement like yoga and tai chi, etc.)
3. **Brain re-training:** shifting thinking patterns and responses to symptoms (away from fear and preoccupation, which reinforces symptoms – and towards reassurance, regulation and safety, which rewires neural pathways over time).

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4. **Learning how to tap into and process emotions in healthy ways:** it's common to habitually suppress emotions such as anger, resentment, jealousy, shame, grief, etc. but this creates inner tension and activates the nervous system.
5. **Taking steps to reduce stress and pressure** (including self-imposed pressures such as perfectionism, people pleasing and harsh self-criticism)
6. **Learning to live in a way that supports nervous system health:** with greater self-compassion, lightness, ease and fun 😊

Where can I learn more about this approach?

There's a huge array of excellent resources on the neuroplastic approach: books, websites, apps, documentaries, podcasts, etc. For a comprehensive list, see the [resources page](#) of our website. Below is a curated list to help you get started....

Where to begin:

- *The Science Behind the Symptoms* podcast ([episode 1](#)) where Dr Howard Schubiner and Dr Rebecca Kennedy explain how our brains create our experiences, including chronic symptoms
- Dr Howard Schubiner explaining the neuroplastic approach to understanding and treating chronic symptoms on Dr Chatterjee's podcast, *Feel Better, Live More* ([episode 310](#))
- *The Way Out* (book) by Alan Gordon, LCSW
- *Curable* app: a neuroscience-based app for chronic symptom recovery which includes neuroscience lessons and recovery practices all accessible on your phone – [free trial available](#) via our affiliate relationship with Curable Health

A few more resources to explore next:

- [Video series](#) by Dr Howard Schubiner explaining chronic pain (also applies to other symptoms)
- Lorimer Moseley (pain scientist) – short video explaining pain (also applies to symptoms) – [Taming The Beast](#)

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- *Unlearn your Pain & Unlearn your Anxiety & Depression* (books), Dr Howard Schubiner
- Nicole Sach's book, *Mind Your Body* and her podcast, *The Cure for Chronic Pain*
- Other episodes of the *Science Behind the Symptoms* – podcast from the Association for the Treatment of Neuroplastic Symptoms (all about the neuroscience explaining recoveries)
- *Freeme* app (Freeme is an affiliate partner that offers a [recovery app](#) designed specifically for healing fatigue-related conditions using nervous-system-based approaches)

Where can I get support?

It's often possible to guide yourself on a mind-body healing journey using low-cost resources, but if you feel that you need additional support, UK-based coaches are listed on the [SIRPA website](#).

At Living Proof, we run monthly webinars (Stories of Hope) and occasional courses (Mindbuddy Online) to support people using the neuroplastic approach to heal. Sign up for [our newsletter](#) to be the first to know about learning events.

A few key points to remember

- **Your symptoms are 100% real.**

Even though neuroplastic symptoms do not relate to structural damage or illness, they are very very real. They can be severe and debilitating – and they can take many different forms.

- **Your symptoms are not your fault**

Your nervous system is doing exactly what it's designed to do: protect you. It's just that it's got stuck in threat mode, most likely in response to chronic or traumatic stress. None of this is your fault. You are not doing this to yourself.

- **Neuroplastic symptoms are not a weakness**

Anyone who lives with chronic symptoms is incredibly strong – please acknowledge this. You have likely been carrying a lot – and your symptoms contain important messages about stress and overwhelm, inviting a kind and loving response.

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- **The neuroplastic approach is brain science**

There is nothing 'woo' about mind-body medicine; this is neuroscience. For a detailed list of the science evidencing the mind-body connection, check out this [bibliography](#) from our friends at the Association for the Treatment of Neuroplastic Symptoms. For helpful summaries of key studies showing the effectiveness of the neuroplastic treatment approach, head to the [science section](#) of our website.

- **You don't have to go it alone**

Whilst mind-body healing does involve a lot of self-discovery and inner work, you don't have to do this alone. In fact, the nervous system regulates in connection with others. Incredible support exists in this mind-body community; please do reach out to us if you would like to be connected with supportive communities - or for a brief chat about the neuroplastic approach with a member of our recoveree team: hello@livingproof.org.uk.

- **Recovery from neuroplastic symptoms is entirely possible.**

The nervous system remains plastic (changeable) throughout our lives, which means that neuroplastic symptoms can also change. We can harness this plasticity and brain science in order to recover.

Our whole team is living proof of this.