





# PAIN MATTERS

Community Information Series  
Hunter Integrated Pain Service  
January 2010

## Inner Wholeness

	 <b>Information content</b> Complex
	<b>Contacts for further discussion</b> You may be able to discuss inner world concepts with your local doctor. Talking to family and friends may be helpful. Staff from Hunter Integrated Pain Service can be involved if you are referred.
	<b>Further reading</b> Meaning-full Disease. Brian Broom. Karnac Books. London 2007.  The Divided Mind: the epidemic of mindbody disorders. John E Sarno. Harper Collins. New York 2006.  The Power of Now: a guide to spiritual enlightenment. Eckhart Tolle. Hachette Australia. Sydney 2004  Ageless Body, Timeless Mind. Deepak Chopra. Harmony Books. New York 1994  Spirituality and Pain. <a href="http://www.hnehealth.nsw.gov.au/pain">www.hnehealth.nsw.gov.au/pain</a> Information for the community/ Meaning and Personal Story

***Healing of the body after physical injury is influenced by responses that take place in the mind***

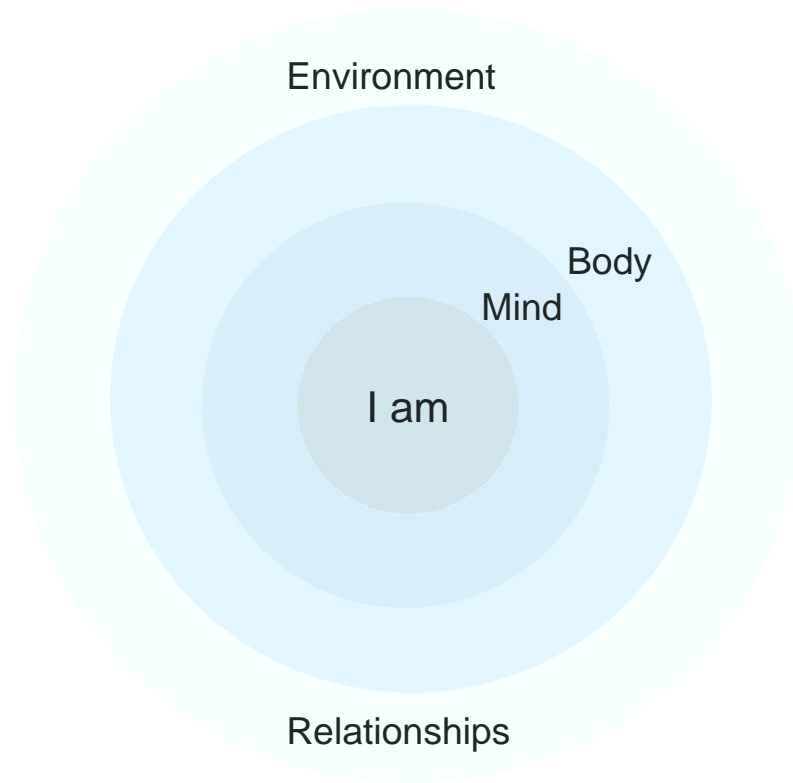
***“Outer” physical pain may carry a message of unresolved “inner” tension***

### **A whole person approach**

The traditional approach of Western medicine has been to focus on discrete parts rather than seeing the person as a whole. Not only are mind and body seen as divided, but also the body itself is subdivided into its component organ systems. This narrow focus has brought increased understanding of some aspects of health but it underestimates the importance of how the parts function together as an integrated whole.

In contrast the whole person diagram shown in Figure 1 emphasises the connectedness of our being. Each layer merges seamlessly with the next. At the centre we have a deep inner self or soul, represented by the “I am”. Our “I am” is expressed outwardly through mind and body and ultimately the way we relate to others and the environment. From this perspective the inner self can be strengthened by the good that is outside in the world and the world in turn can be strengthened by the goodness that flows out of our soul.

Figure 1. The whole person



### **The rebel mind**

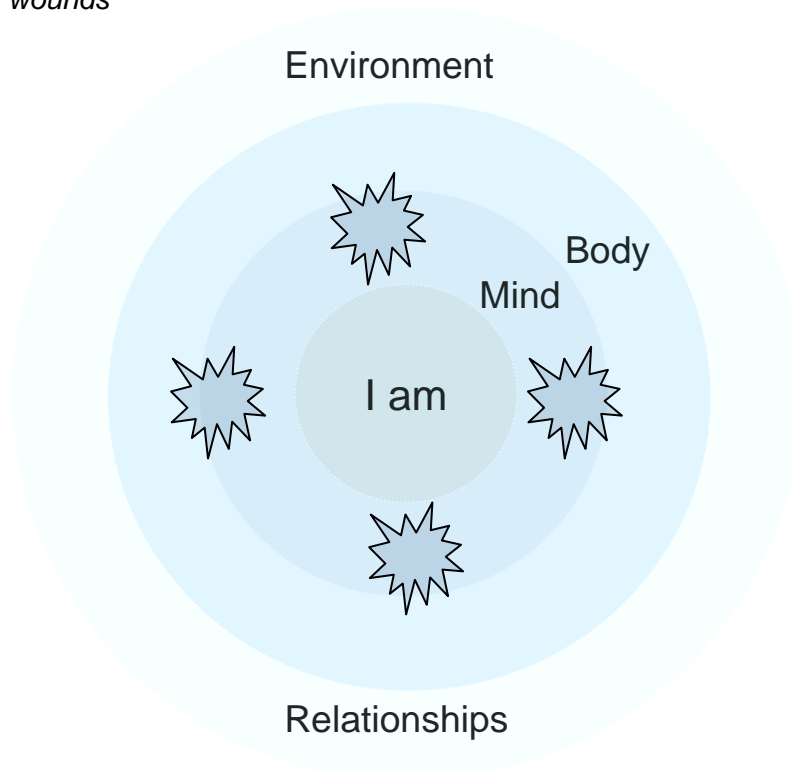
If the strength and goodness of inner self always flowed effortlessly to outer being there would be much less sickness in the world than there is today. Unfortunately this is often not the case. The problem lies in the rebellious nature of the human mind. Often the mind is not content to simply be a servant to the rest of our being. It wants to take charge. Our ego, the so-called “egoic mind”, takes over. A characteristic of this “egoic” mind is that it resists rather than accepts the flow of life.

### **Inner world tension**

The egoic mind resists by fighting against whatever comes to it from the outside world and also by blocking the emotional flow welling up from within. Part of this resistance can involve laying down distorted core beliefs about the state of the world. “People cannot be trusted” and “I am not lovable” are examples. The emotional aspect of resistance commonly involves holding onto negative emotions at either a conscious or unconscious level rather than releasing them. One example would be holding onto anger and refusing to forgive; another would be not even recognising the anger and suppressing it in the unconscious mind. The combination of distorted core beliefs and the negative emotions that wrap around them form inner wounds. These are illustrated by the jagged shapes in Figure 2.

Resistance of any sort creates tension. Try holding a door shut that someone is attempting to force open. Your muscles physically resist and tension is created. In the same way at the level of the mind, resistance creates inner tension. Inner wounds, being a form of resistance therefore cause tension. If enough wounding occurs then inner tension builds to such an extent that our “I am” becomes obscured (Figure 3). Our life is divided and we no longer live out of the fullness of who we really are.

Figure 2. Inner wounds



Personality style plays a significant role in the generation of inner tension. Personality influences how we respond to life. For example, people with a perfectionist tendency feel compelled to bring order. To be driven by perfectionism is to resist the way the world actually is. Another example is seen in people with a strong need to help others. This is another form of resistance. In effect it is a non-acceptance that people are ultimately responsible for their own wellbeing. Both examples are common contributors to inner tension.

We all carry a certain amount of inner tension. However, if we are prone to non-acceptance of the events around us and suppression of emotions, tension continues to build as we go about our daily life.

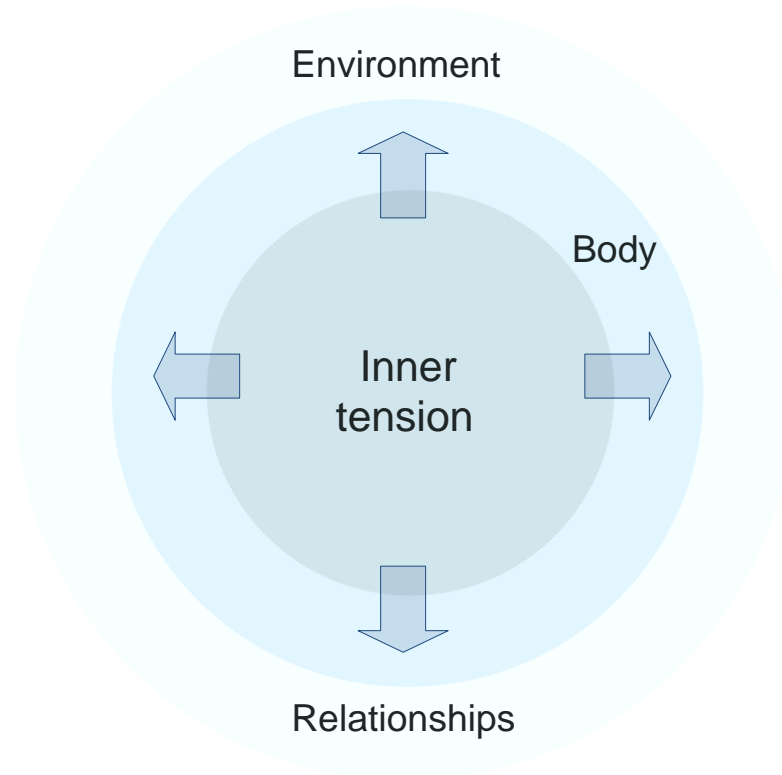
### **Outworking in illness**

As inner tension builds we need to work harder to “hold it all in”. Sometimes this causes mental health problems such as anxiety and depression. However, there comes a point when a threshold is reached and it is no longer possible to continue the inner containment. Spill over of tension to the outer being occurs (Figure 3) via changes in nervous, hormonal and immune systems. Physical pain or illness result.

An example of inner state affecting the outer physical body is seen in the cold, sweaty palms and increased pulse rate that occurs in situations where we feel a need to escape. Here anxiety activates the sympathetic nervous system, which controls the “fight or flight” response. Sympathetic activation causes the increase in pulse and sweating and also the reduced blood flow to the skin of the hands, hence the drop in temperature. Another example is the tendency we have to get infections when emotionally stressed. This is because stress interferes with the action of the immune system.

One way to see persistent physical pain is as the outworking of inner tension. It has been stated that “pain is the embodiment of resistance”. In other words, as we resist in our minds, that resistance becomes imprinted in our bodies in the form of physical pain.

*Figure 3. Overflow of inner tension*



An interesting theory, proposed by Dr JE Sarno a rehabilitation specialist from New York, is that the intense effort of suppressing emotions and holding them in the unconscious activates the sympathetic nervous system. Sympathetic activation in turn constricts blood vessels and causes localised slight reductions in tissue blood flow. Reduced blood flow means decreased oxygen supply and this is proposed as a common cause of persistent pain. The process can affect nerve, muscle or tendon. Where nerves are involved numbness, weakness, loss of reflexes and nerve irritation (neuropathic) pain can result. This is one explanation for the situation of someone with spinal problems having loss of nerve function and pain in the leg (sciatica) with no direct pressure on the nerves supplying that leg. The explanation lies in the reduced blood flow and oxygen delivery to the relevant nerves. The theory can be applied in other situations as well. Reduced blood flow to muscle can cause the trigger point tenderness and taut bands typical of fibromyalgia and myofascial pain syndromes. Involvement of tendons can cause problems with joint movement such as shoulder pain and tennis elbow. In all of these examples a whole person approach explains how tension in the inner world can cause very real physical pain.

Another theory is that inner tension causes direct amplification or sensitisation of pain related pathways in the spinal cord and brain. Once this happens a stimulus that is not normally painful can trigger pain. Recent research has highlighted the importance of the glial cells that support nerve tissue in the brain and spinal cord. The “macro” (large) glial cells supply nutrients while micro (small) glia are part of the immune system. If microglial cells become “activated” they release inflammatory chemicals

which sensitise brain and spinal cord pathways and amplify pain related messages. It is a theoretical possibility that inner tension might contribute to glial cell activation via immune system pathways.

Professor Brian Broom, an immunologist and psychotherapist from New Zealand, has an interest in the link between inner world and outer illness. He has described many cases in which a physical illness has very specific meaning in terms of the life story of the person involved. To give an example, a person who became irritated and angry, effectively allowing someone to “get up their nose”, developed an allergy-like nasal problem. Another person “put a brave face” on a difficulty and went on to develop a facial rash. The underlying mechanisms of such specific meaningful responses are not well understood. In part it seems that changes in the immune system may play a role but more research is needed to increase knowledge in this area.

A common illustration of physical illness having a deeper underlying meaning is seen in cases where a series of health problems follow one upon another. One physical problem can be “successfully” treated with a physical therapy only to have another problem develop soon afterward. This too may be “successfully” treated and yet again another problem emerges. This scenario raises the possibility of an underlying inner world issue. If one physical expression of inner pain is removed another takes its place. Dr Sarno has called this the “symptom imperative”. If the underlying issue is not addressed ongoing problems will continue to be expressed.

## **Releasing inner tension**

To begin the process of releasing inner tension there are a number of aspects to consider:

### **1. Acceptance**

Learning to accept ourselves as we are and the world as it is will reduce tension whatever our situation in life. Then beyond bringing us to a calmer place, acceptance provides a solid foundation on which to build significant life changes.

### **2. Awareness**

Simply becoming aware that we have an inner world that is crucial to our health and wellbeing is important. In fact turning attention inwards and increasing awareness of what is happening at a deeper level, in itself, begins to reduce inner tension.

### **3. Core beliefs**

Can you identify any deeply held beliefs that you have come to over the course of your life? If so are they based in reality or they distorted, part of interpreting the world as more threatening than it actually is? If they are negative beliefs can we begin to let them go?

### **4. Blocked emotions**

Going back in time to key life events and teasing out any negative emotional response can be helpful. Having discerned the key events we can then make a conscious decision to reinterpret them and release the emotions that are attached.

### **5. Responding differently**

Relaxation and meditation are strategies that can be used to retrain our responses to life events. Try spending 10 minutes each morning and night focusing on stillness and calm. This takes our focus deeper than the endless workings of egoic mind. We

reach a point of peace that over time can expand to influence our responses throughout the entire day.

***As we learn to accept rather than resist the flow of life, we begin to release inner hurt through words rather than holding it in the body.***

## **Practical steps**

If you decide to explore your inner world more deeply then you may find it helpful to set aside protected time each day. You can use that time to quietly reflect on your life story and potential links to health problems. You may like to look at recommended readings listed at the start of this article or write down your thoughts in a journal.

The following questions can be used as prompts:

1. List possible contributors to tension in your inner world. These might include:
  - Childhood traumas
  - Traumas of adult life
  - Day to day stresses
  - Personality factors – how would you describe your personality? Does your personality mean that you put excessive pressure on yourself or respond in negative ways?
2. List the possible outer consequences of unresolved inner issues. These might include various health problems along with difficulties in relationships and environmental issues.
3. Describe your inner emotional response to each situation you have listed in Question 1. Recognise that as you begin to acknowledge these responses you are reducing the tension in your inner world and thereby the pressure on your body to respond physically.
4. What are the core characteristics that define you as an individual? What words would you use to describe yourself? What is it that makes you unique? What are the things that you really enjoy doing and that bring you a sense of fulfilment? What are the values that you would like to live by?
5. Often there can be a gap between our identity and values on one hand and the way we actually live on the other. To close that gap, what changes might you make to your way of living?

## **In summary**

Health problems can come about through:

1. Resistance to the flow of life
2. Loss of connection with inner self or soul
3. Inner tension
4. Overflow to outer illness

The journey back to good health involves:

1. Acceptance of life
2. Awareness of inner world
3. Inner transformation
4. Outworking of wholeness