



## Back Pain and Self-Management: A Success Story

Who would have thought that the one thing I had resisted doing for 20 years was the one thing that was my way out of chronic or persisting pain. Not me!

I'm Trevor Barker, and I live in rural Australia. For 20 years I suffered debilitating persisting pain that started out as a low back injury and over those years grew to be involved in most of my body. I'd joke with my massage therapist when she asked me how I was by saying, 'my nose is ok today'. Pain had grown from my low back to be up my spine, neck, arms and legs. It affected my ability to work, it affected my relationships, as I slowly withdrew from friends and family. Finding myself isolated and in lots of pain, I looked to my treating doctors to provide a 'proper' diagnosis and a clear fix for the problem that was the cause of my pain. Their response was to increase medication and order more scans to find out what was wrong. I tried everything on offer apart from surgery-- spinal injections, opioid medication, rest and avoiding any activity that I thought would inflame my pain.

The one thing I avoided learning about that ended up being the way out of my pain was self-management. Whilst I looked for an answer from a purely medical focus--that is looking for a root cause and then prescribing a treatment-- I was avoiding other options that I didn't realise had a realistic and expected outcome of recovery. In my problem-focused persona, I was looking in the wrong place for an answer.

Thankfully, I managed to discover a different approach to treating pain and that approach had some important differences to a single focus on cause/ fix-it-with-a-pill type thinking.

This fact sheet is my perspective on what self-management offers to people living with persisting pain.

If you had talked with me when I was fixated on a 'what is the problem and what will you do to fix it' approach about taking a fresh look to change my approach to start on a path of changing my approach to include self-management, I would have rejected the thought altogether.

Just how do you shift this fixated view to take a fresh look at pain and embrace the opportunity self-management offers? What is this opportunity? What can I expect if I change to embrace self-management, as a different way to treat my pain?

For me, the shift occurred when I was doing everything doctors were prescribing to investigate and treat my pain with procedures and pills, and I was still in pain. In fact, over 20 years, the pain escalated. It did not reduce whilst I was reliant on others to fix it. I took a good look at myself and started to plan an early retirement in a retirement village with a nursing home attached. Pain had put me in a dark place of being unable to see that there were treatment options that I could adopt to make a difference. It was at this low point of starting to plan an even more restrictive and protective lifestyle in order to manage life with high levels of pain that I learnt about a pain management program. The short story is that I did this program and learnt all about persisting pain and the difference self-management can make—a frankly startling discovery to me.

By understanding pain I could begin to apply self-management to change my life and start to treat my pain. I gave this approach a go because I'd tried everything else on offer by doctors and this had left me in a dark place with more pain and no abatement with high levels of opioids. These came at a cost. Side effects to medication was a worry for me.

In my case, what made a difference to shift this fixated view of pain was the harsh reality that my approach made matters worse—not better.

The opportunity on offer to look closely at self-management is the change that it brings. Change shifts pain. More of the same ends up seeing a growing of our pain. Just was is self-management?

For me, it starts with learning more about pain. I investigated. I watched YouTube presentations by the world's leading pain scientists, and they were all talking about the way an over sensitive pain system means the slightest nudge generates high levels of pain. They talked about what we can do to calm down and then retrain our over-sensitive systems. I was fascinated by the contrast between my natural inclination to look to others for a fix and the difference understanding pain and then handling it myself made.

I discovered pain isn't all about 'issues with my tissues'. It includes my thoughts, my psychological wellbeing and my social functioning. This knowledge opened me up to the thought that rather than be stuck with pain I could give self-management a go. This didn't mean I was on my own. It meant I could, with support, begin to change my approach.

Doing for myself rather than being done to. This is the central feature of self-management. With support from the pain management program, I came up with a plan. This included psychological and social aspects to treating pain. I was now in control rather than being heavily dependent on others. I began to move, to walk, to go to water aerobics. I began to calm myself, ditch stress, ditch being reliant on a fix, find meaning in relationships, friends, group activities, and volunteering.

There were lots of approaches to treating my pain that gave me my life back. Initially, I decided to get a life even if it meant more pain. I had this thought because I was already in debilitating pain and didn't have a life so I imagined it would be better to have a life with pain.

By understanding pain and changing my approach to do for me rather than be done to, I started to see a lessening of my pain intensity. I researched, gained support, and, over the course of 12 months, came off my pain medication. Pain continued to lessen and now, 4 years post the program, I'm off medication. I have a life I control. Pain is a background noise that I have to stop and listen hard to feel it, rather than being overwhelming.

My biggest encouragement to any person living with persisting pain is to start with being curious. Take a fresh look at the opportunity self-management offers. Learn more. Make a plan with help from a pain coach or specialist pain service. Step by step reduce stress and increase meaning in your life. Gain supportive understanding friends. Be realistic and make small steps. By learning more about pain you can confidently adopt self-management to guide you in applying new strategies to treat your pain. In my experience this approach that contrasted with my natural inclination to let others 'fix' me stands out as the most effective way for me to not only manage pain, but apply strategies that have changed the intensity of my pain from debilitating down to a new normal that is barely noticeable.

This sums up the opportunity self-management offers. In reflection, if I had held onto the belief that others need to fix me and my natural inclination to do this I'd still be in pain and likely living alone in a retirement village. Instead I'm happily married, enjoying life, employed and pain isn't a problem. I'm thankful for hearing the difference self-management can make and thankful for the support others have given me to understand pain and do something about it.

### **About the Author**

Trevor Barker lives in rural Victoria (Australia) with his wife Kay. After suffering debilitating back pain for 20 years Trevor turned to a pain management program where he learnt the value of self-management from a multidisciplinary team.

In 2018, Trevor volunteered with Pain Revolution to undertake community Engagement. Working alongside some leading educators Trevor has been recognised for his contribution to Pain Revolution through sharing his story of recovery and through advocating for improved services to those living with persisting or chronic pain.

Trevor works for Amelio Health as a Pain Coach supporting those undergoing their online pain management program that recognises and promotes the importance of self-management.

In his spare time, Trevor speaks at education events and conferences providing a lived experience perspective that is engaging, hopeful and heartwarming.

Trevor enjoys writing, participating in online podcasts, family time, walking in the bush, woodworking and playing the flute.