

# Research offers insights into impact of chronic pain

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Credit: Victoria University

Drawing on her personal and academic background, Dr. Godfrey's research has revealed that chronic pain does not impair how people pay attention to threatening information or their ability to focus when distractions are present.

Dr. Godfrey conducted several studies based on the assumption that

chronic [pain](#) would impair the way [people](#) pay [attention](#) to information that is relevant to pain. However, in each study she found that this was not the case.

In one study, participants were asked to identify different letters of the alphabet that were presented very briefly. Sometimes a second picture was presented at the same time that they were asked to ignore. The pictures could be of people going about their [daily activities](#), or they could be [graphic images](#) of injuries to the body. Dr. Godfrey predicted that people in chronic pain would be particularly distracted by the images of body threat. Although they were much slower to identify letters when another image was present, participants with chronic pain displayed the same patterns of attention.

"People with chronic pain do feel impaired in their thinking and they do respond more slowly than healthy people, but this is unlikely to be caused by the pain affecting their attention specifically," says Dr. Godfrey. Her results suggest that pain might affect other aspects of cognition to impair thinking.

Dr. Godfrey has fibromyalgia, a long-term condition causing generalised pain and fatigue. After completing a Master of Science with Distinction in 2011, she began a career in the public service but had to resign after a flare-up of her condition. Several months of illness followed and her interest in how pain affects thinking grew. After completing a pain-management programme, she made the decision to return to the University to complete her Ph.D.

"Completing my Ph.D. while dealing with fibromyalgia was not easy. Like many people with chronic pain, I find it hard to think when the pain is bad. However, I am fortunate to have a very strong support network. This support, combined with my drive to add to my understanding of pain and cognition, kept me going," says Dr. Godfrey.

Chronic pain is an under-recognised condition in New Zealand, despite the fact that the Ministry of Health estimates it affects approximately 20 percent of the country's population, she says.

In 2014, Dr. Godfrey received a Port Nicholson Rotary Goal Setters Award in recognition of overcoming significant hurdles in pursuit of her goals.

Her Ph.D. supervisor Dr. Gina Grimshaw, an Associate Professor in the School of Psychology, says Dr. Godfrey is a remarkable student. "Her own experiences give her a unique insight into [chronic pain](#), and the motivation to do research that will have real effects on people's lives. But she has also been able to put aside her own experience and approach the problem critically, as a scientist."

Provided by Victoria University

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