

How Psychology Can Help With Chronic Pain and Illness

**Maia Kredentser PhD, CPsych with help from
Colleagues** (Drs. Thachuk, Ceccarelli, Carlson, Bilevicius,
Sabourin)

Department of Clinical Health Psychology, Max Rady
College of Medicine, University of Manitoba



Acknowledgement of Indigenous Ancestral and Territorial Lands

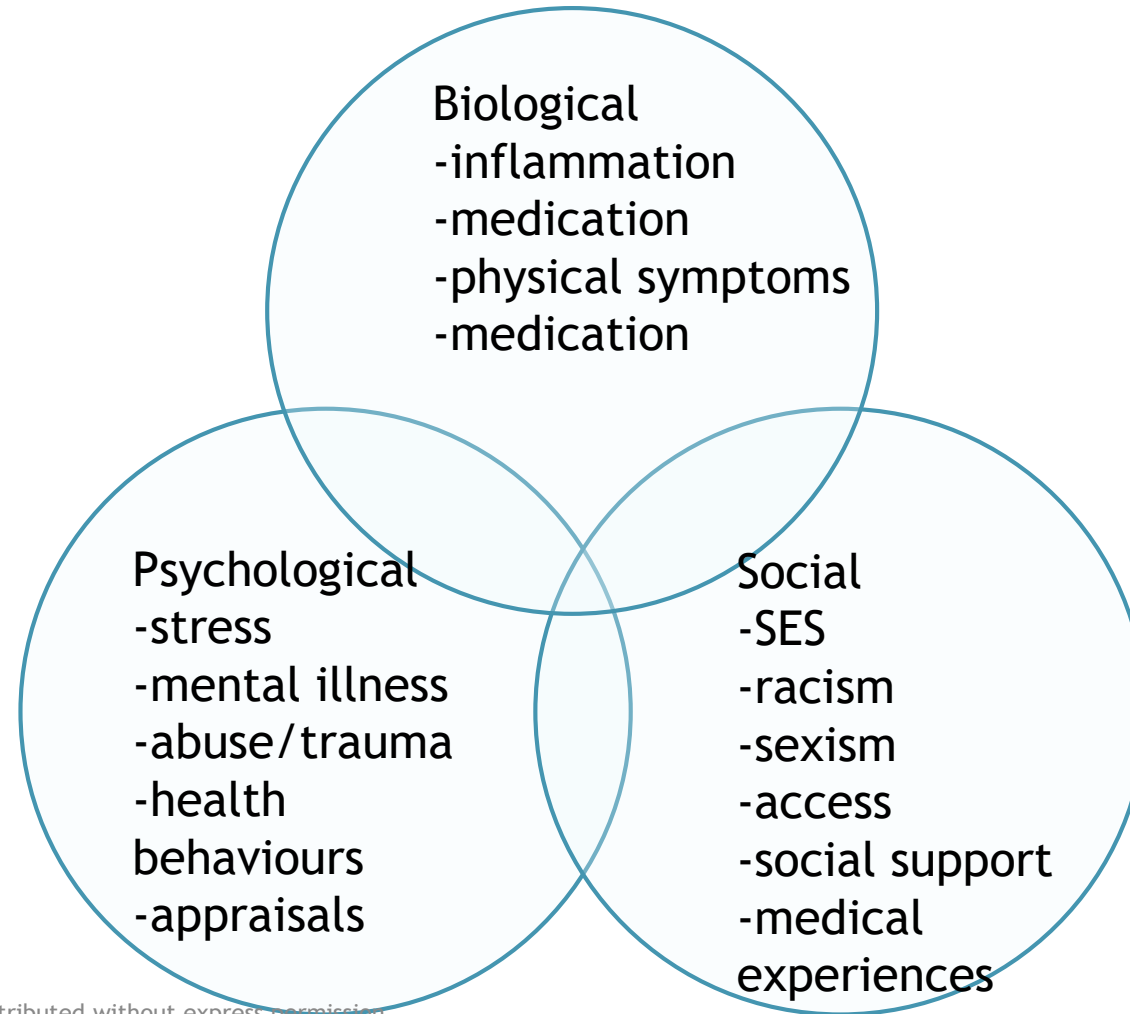
Health services across Manitoba are provided in facilities located on the original lands of First Nations, Inuit, and on the national homeland of the Red River Métis Nation.

Manitoba's health authorities respect that First Nations treaties were made on these territories, acknowledge harms and mistakes, and we dedicate ourselves to collaborate in partnership with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in the spirit of reconciliation.

Objectives

- ▶ Review common biopsychosocial symptoms experienced by clients with autoimmune diseases and associated complications
- ▶ Provide helpful strategies for managing physical symptoms using scientifically-backed psychological strategies

Biopsychosocial model of health



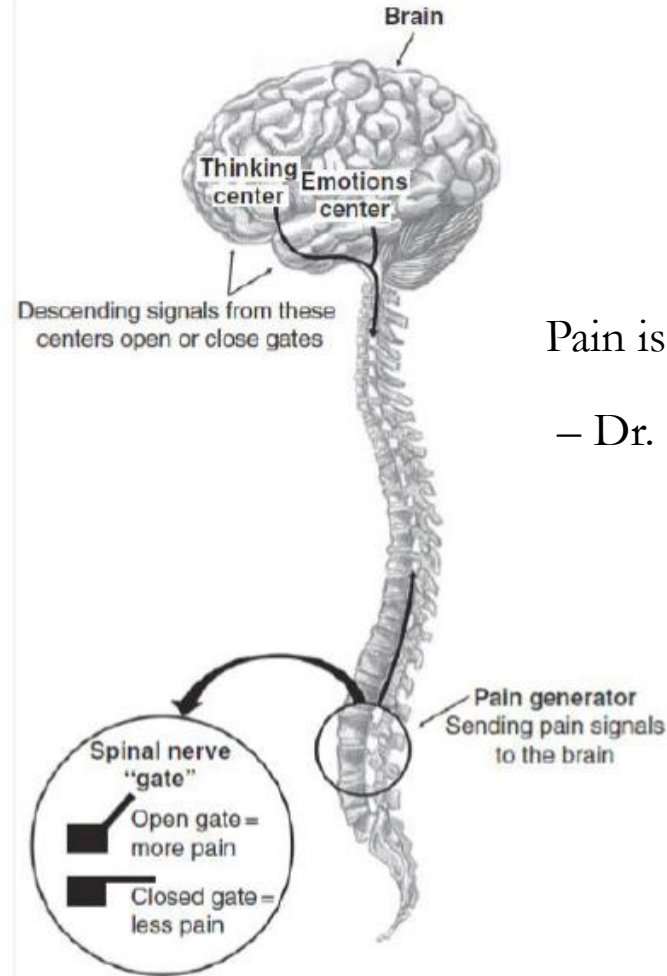
Gate control theory of pain

Gate Openers

- no exercise, sitting around a lot, overdoing;
- feeling depressed, anxious, angry, fearful, or other negative moods;
- unhelpful, catastrophic, negative thoughts;
- too much pain medicine over a long period of time.

Gate Closers

- meditation, yoga, physical activity;
- mindfulness;
- present-moment awareness;
- pacing your activities without underdoing or overdoing.



Pain is physical and emotional 100% of the time
– Dr. Rachel Zoffness

Barriers to living well with chronic illness

- Struggling with Symptoms
- Setting unrealistically high standards
- Negative thoughts/Self-criticism
- Intolerance of Uncertainty
- Over-responsibility for others/Self-neglect
- Need for approval
- Anxiety/Worry
- Sadness/Depression
- Grief
- Shame
- Guilt
- Fear/Avoidance

Coping skills for managing illness

Psychological
-stress
-mental illness
-abuse/trauma
-health
behaviours
-appraisals



- Stress management
- Acceptance
- Present moment awareness
- Value-based living
- Handling difficult thoughts and feelings

Dealing with unhelpful thoughts

Catastrophic Thoughts	Coping Thoughts
“I have no control over my pain (or other symptom).”	“I have tools to cope.”
“This will never get better.”	“There are times it will be worse and time it will be better; I have strategies to help manage the symptoms.”
“This is going to get worse and worse until I go crazy.”	“I have managed this situation before. I can do it again. I won’t feel great all the time, but this condition does not make any one crazy”
“This should never have happened to me.”	“I am not a bad person because I have autoimmune symptoms.”
“I should have gotten better quicker than this.”	“I am doing what I can; I am learning new coping skills every day”
“I can’t do anything when I’m in a flare.”	“I can do some things, even if right now I can’t do everything I would like to”
“No one else can really understand my condition.”	“Pain is common; there are others who have this too and will understand”
“I’ll never be able to enjoy life again.”	“I may not feel great now, but it won’t always be this way. There are lots of things people with autoimmune conditions can do”
“It’s all my fault that I’m in this mess.”	“There is nothing I did wrong; autoimmune conditions/chronic pain is an illness that affects lots of people” “My symptoms are frustrating but it is no one’s fault”
“If I let my symptoms affect my work, others will think there’s something wrong with me.”	“No one thinks less of me because I have these symptoms. It is a chronic illness.” “ I work hard and will be evaluated on my work not my physical health”

HAVING A THOUGHT VS. BUYING A THOUGHT

Our thoughts only have as much power as we give them. Notice how changing the label of a thought can change how that thought makes you feel. This exercise again helps us to gain some distance from our thoughts. We can have thoughts – but we don't necessarily have to “buy” our thoughts.

"I am..." vs. "I am having the thought..." vs. "I notice I am having the thought..."

"I am worthless."

This is a powerful, self-defining thought.

This labels the *thought as the truth*.

"I am having the thought that I am worthless."

This loses its self-defining power over you.

It is now simply a *thought*.

"I notice I am having the thought that I am worthless."

This creates an even greater distance between you and the thought.

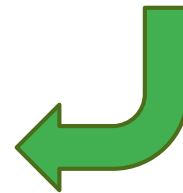
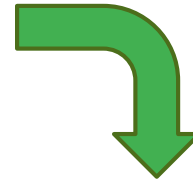
What was it like to make the change in that language? What happened to how you felt about the situation?

We can learn to separate from our thoughts – “Here is me.... And here are my thoughts. I am not my thoughts. So thoughts are not necessarily the truth. In fact, they are rarely the absolute truth.” By gaining this distance from our unhelpful thoughts, we can decrease our suffering in very real ways.

Acceptance and getting 'un-stuck'

- ▶ (you don't have to like it)
- ▶ Struggle with symptoms is a gate opener
- ▶ Trying to avoid what hurts (physically or emotionally) adds to suffering





Calming the body

- ▶ Pain is a danger signal
- ▶ Activating our ‘relax’ system directly counters this and can reduce pain experience
 - ▶ Diaphragmatic breathing [Calm Breathing | Blog | Anxiety Canada](#)
 - ▶ Progressive Muscle Relaxation [Tense and Release | Blog | Anxiety Canada](#)
 - ▶ Guided imagery [Relaxing Beach | Blog | Anxiety Canada](#)

Values

- Describe global qualities of ongoing behavior (e.g., hard working, supportive, conscientious, compassionate, open, spiritual, imaginative, etc)
- Are deeply personal – who or what is important to you?
- Create a sense of life meaning, purpose, and direction
- Aspirational (ie, what qualities or strengths do you want to exhibit on an ongoing basis)

Values inform SMART Goals

- ▶ Specific
 - ▶ Measurable
 - ▶ Achievable
 - ▶ Realistic
 - ▶ Time-oriented
-
- ▶ **“I am going to go for a walk on Tuesdays and Thursdays for 15 minutes in the evening” vs “I will exercise more”**
 - ▶ Connect to values - health/time in nature is important

Effective Communication

- Adopt an effective communication style (ie., Assertive rather than passive or aggressive)
 - “When you....I feel....I need...”
 - “Thank you for the invitation. I’m not up for that today, but please invite me the next time you are going”
- Avoid “mind reading” others’ thoughts
- Avoid trying to fool others about your pain
- Be honest and communicate clearly (eg, today I can participate 25%, 50%, 75%)

Effective Communication

- Be flexible (ie, have a plan B or C for any given day)
- Attend to your basic needs before trying to assist others (oxygen mask metaphor)
- Encourage flexibility in others and tell them how they can help you (eg, delegating tasks, just listening)

Case Study: Mary

Mary, a 54-year-old woman, loved organizing, advising, crafting, connecting, and bringing families together. She was passionate about her job working as a wedding coordinator and decorator. She valued her physical, emotional, and spiritual health, friendships, and spending time in nature, and creativity. She regularly prioritized Sunday morning walks with friends.

Mary has rheumatoid arthritis and has had several flares. During her last flare, it became very difficult to work and due to swelling in her hands and wrists, crafting was very difficult. She left her job as it involved too much movement and told her friends she was no longer able to join them for their weekly walks.

Consequently, she spent most of her time at home, rarely engaging with friends, and became depressed and disconnected from the things she once enjoyed. She stopped exercising and became physically deconditioned (disconnection from values, or “values illness”).

As a result of these changes, she became more sensitized to pain, her hands became stiffer, and the quality of her life diminished. Mary felt frustrated, guilty, worthless, hopeless, helpless, and irritable.

Mary's Pain Matrix

Outside World

What have I tried to move me away from (avoid) what hurts inside?

What actions do I take (or could I take) to move me toward what matters to me?

Away

ME

Toward

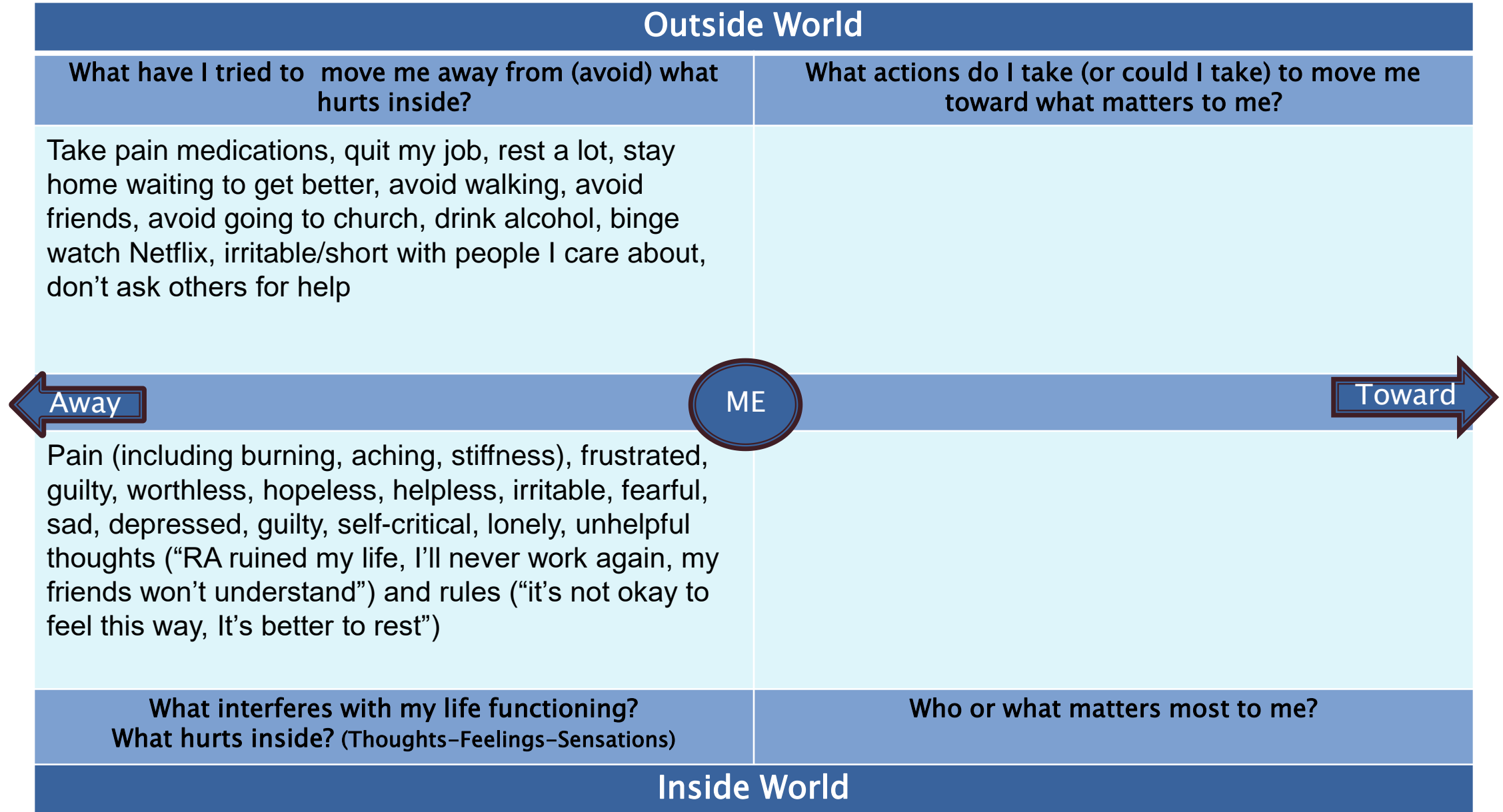
Pain (including burning, aching, stiffness), frustrated, guilty, worthless, hopeless, helpless, irritable, fearful, sad, depressed, guilty, self-critical, lonely, unhelpful thoughts ("RA ruined my life, I'll never work again, my friends won't understand") and rules ("it's not okay to feel this way, It's better to rest")

What interferes with my life functioning?
What hurts inside? (Thoughts-Feelings-Sensations)

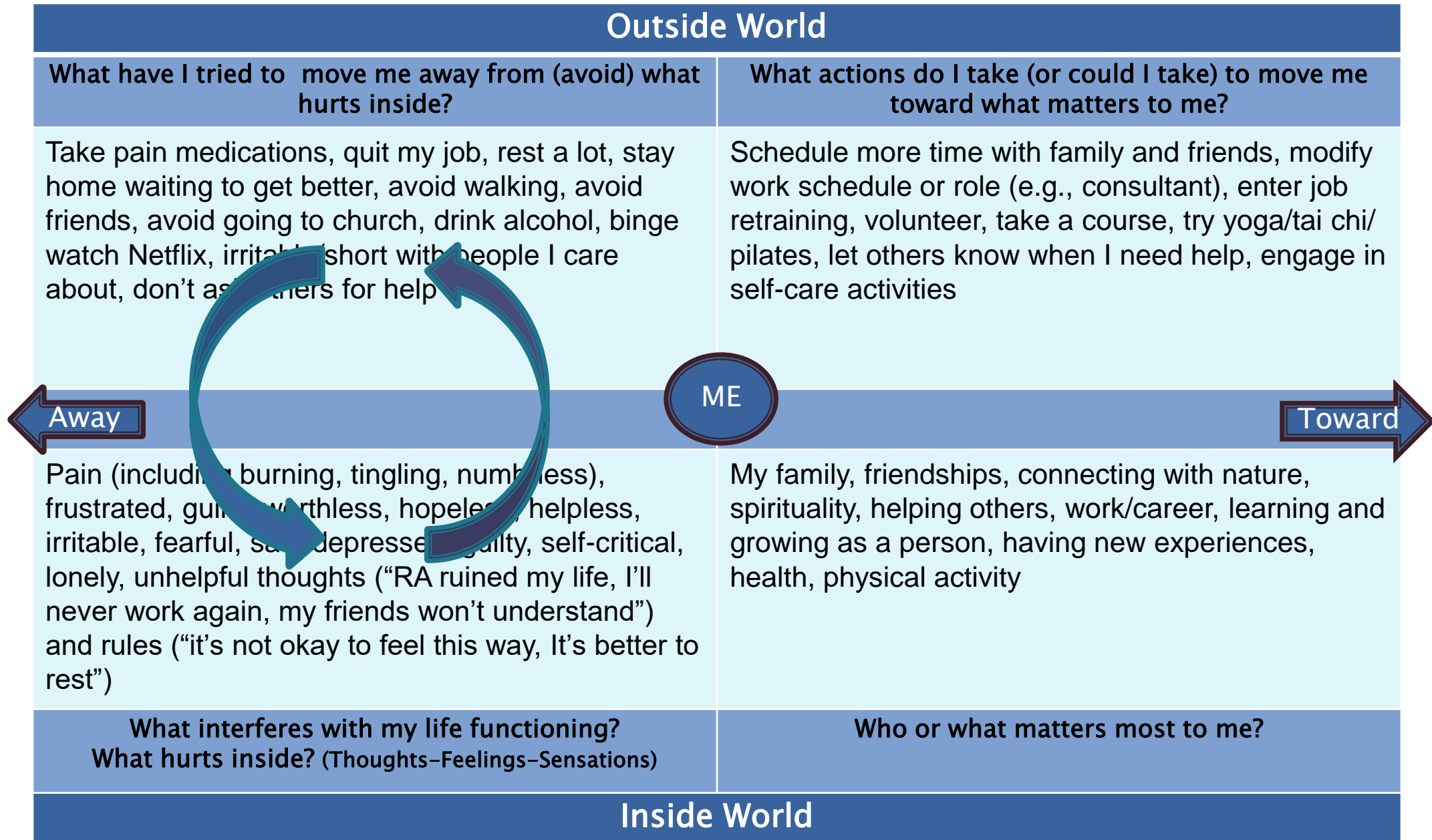
Who or what matters most to me?

Inside World

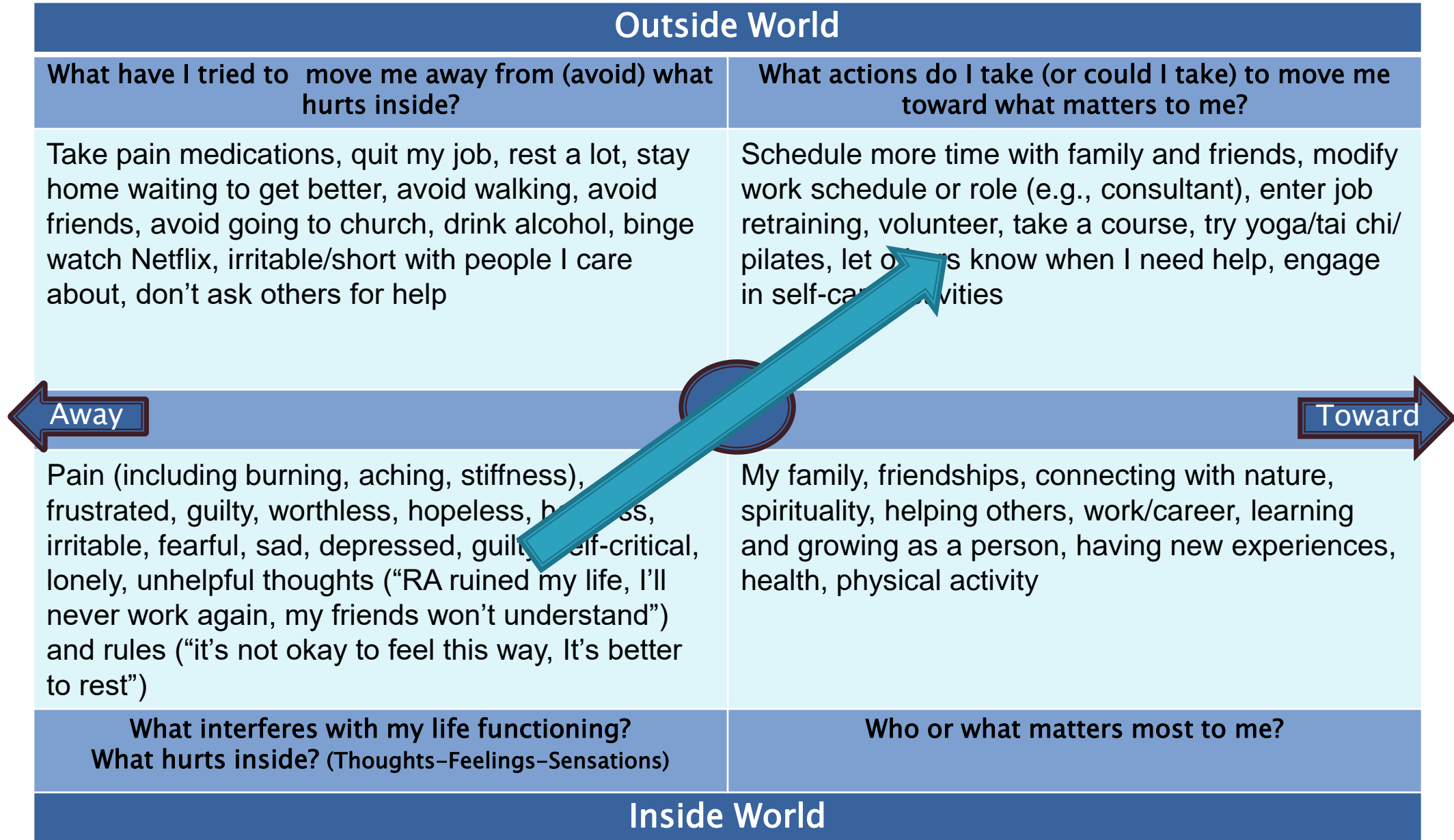
Mary's Pain Matrix



Mary's Pain Matrix

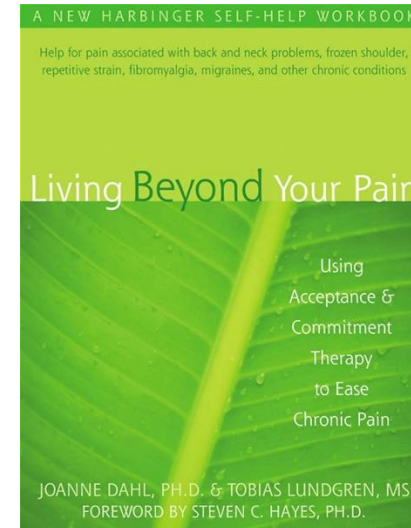
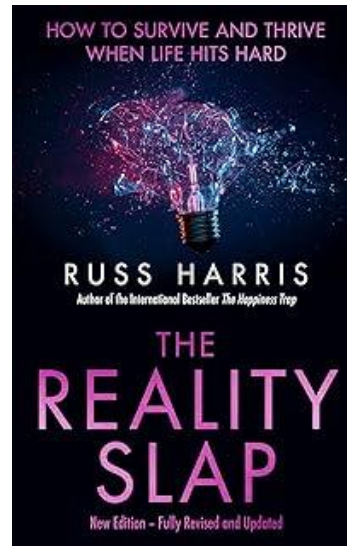
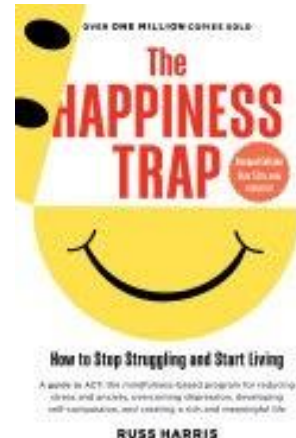
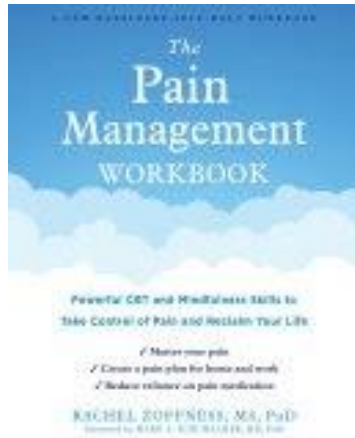


Mary's Pain Matrix



Thank you!

Resources:



<https://wrha.mb.ca/psychology/services/chronic-pain/>

<https://portal.poweroverpain.ca/>