

# Neutral, Unpleasant, Uncomfortable, Painful

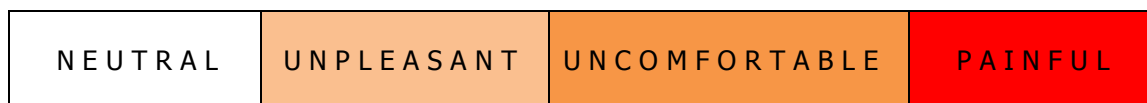
## An Expanded Sensory Spectrum Tool

The problem with pain, frequently, is not the sensory experience in the body. It is what the mind adds onto it -- making it problematic. Illustrations of this reactivity would include, among many other possible reactions, anxiety, fear, an attitude of bracing or defending, a negative anticipation, assigning an adverse meaning, or framing a sensation as "pain" before exploring the actual experience of the sensation. Mindfulness attempts to bring the mind back to the fundamental experience taking place in the body as a way of defusing the mind's reactivity to the perceived or anticipated threat of "pain."

Mindfulness deconstructs the sensory experience in the body into its component parts. It will always have certain qualities - size, shape, depth, temperature, sharpness or dullness, intensity, movement. Each of these qualities has a range. And each of them is constantly changing so that any sensory experience is a living, changing presence in the body. It will never stay quite the same based on our mood, sleep quality, state of mind, the amount of stress we are facing, physical condition, level of fatigue and other factors.

A Mindful relation to "pain" starts with training the mind to experience and recognize these individual qualities, how they change and how they feel. One quality will predominate in one moment. Another will predominate in the next. One morphs into the other. The process keeps happening over and over again. When the mind begins to experientially understand and relate to "pain" in this way, rather than as a uniform, continuous thing, the possibility of just being with the fundamental feeling tone of the sensation emerges.

This experience of feeling tone can be depicted as a progressive spectrum of neutral, unpleasant, uncomfortable or painful. The experiential question in any moment becomes: What is the actual living sensory experience on this spectrum?



Exploring the actual feeling tone of sensation in the body in any moment changes how we understanding and relate to "pain." We now have a way of understanding strong sensation as something other than a rating on a scale of 1 to 10. The space opens to investigate where a particular sensation falls on a progressive spectrum of neutral; then unpleasantness on a scale

of 1 to 10; and then uncomfortableness on a scale of 1 to 10 before classifying and experiencing the sensation as painful on a scale of 1 to 10.

Through patient and careful exploration, we begin to discover the following in our own experience: Some sensations, even ones that involve a fair amount of pressure, may be experienced as neutral. There are differences between unpleasant, uncomfortable and painful sensations and the feeling tone assigned to each has a significant impact on our experience of it. And even strong sensations may be experienced as merely unpleasant or uncomfortable, rather painful. This exploration slowly expands our range of experience; our ability to more accurately perceive the nature of what is present; and defuses reactivity to the experience of strong sensations.

The mind slowly changes its relationship with sensation, and strong sensation, by keeping attention focused on its individual qualities; its constant change; and the experience of neutral, unpleasant, uncomfortable or painful. The mind can now settle into the living experience that is unfolding in the body, rather than jumping to the impression of a sensation as "painful." The mind can begin to see how it misperceives strong sensation as painful and problematic when it may only be unpleasant or uncomfortable.