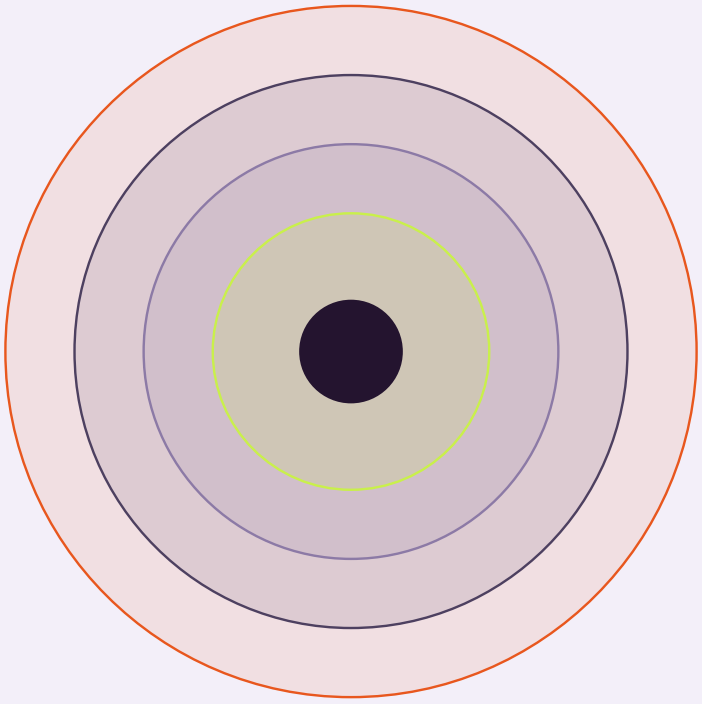


Healing Back Pain: The Mind-Body Connection

A reading of the book by John E. Sarno (1991)

1. ACTION BOOK

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ABOUT THIS EDITION

This is HourLife's reading of Healing Back Pain: The Mind-Body Connection, in our own words. It is not a substitute for the book.

BEFORE YOU START 01

The book in a minute

John E. Sarno was a physician in rehabilitation medicine at New York University's Rusk Institute, where he treated people with back, neck and shoulder pain for decades. In this book he argues that most of the chronic pain he saw came not from damaged discs or worn joints but from what he called tension myositis syndrome, or TMS. In his account, feelings pushed out of awareness, above all anger, lead the brain to reduce blood flow to muscles, nerves and tendons, which causes real pain and pulls attention away from those feelings. His treatment is education: once a medical exam has ruled out serious disease, patients learn the diagnosis, look for psychological causes rather than physical ones, and go back to normal activity. He draws on cases from his own practice throughout. TMS is not an accepted diagnosis in mainstream medicine, although its focus on the brain's part in pain overlaps with modern pain science.

Below are the 9 ideas HourLife readers vote up most, each in our words with a note on what it asks of you, and then the steps that put them to work.

WHAT READERS KEEP

The takeaways

1 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Pain that lasts can be real pain without a damaged spine behind it.

Sarno's central claim is that most of the chronic back pain he saw came from TMS, a harmless change in muscles, nerves and tendons, rather than from discs, arthritis or a bad posture. He never says the pain is imagined. He says it is real, and that its cause is elsewhere. This is his view, not settled medicine.

2 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

In Sarno's model, the pain is a distraction: the mind would rather you worry about your back than feel what you are angry about.

He describes the pain as a defence. Strong feelings the mind finds unacceptable, such as rage at people we love or at our own duties, are kept out of awareness, and a vivid physical symptom keeps attention on the body instead. Seeing the trick, he argues, is what takes its power away.

3 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Being conscientious, driven and eager to please can feed the pain.

Sarno noticed that many of his patients were hard on themselves, responsible to a fault and keen to be seen as good. He coined the word goodism for that last trait. In his model these traits build pressure and resentment that has nowhere to go.

4 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

For Sarno, understanding the process was the treatment.

He taught his patients in lectures and through reading rather than with machines or exercises. He reported that the people who accepted the diagnosis tended to improve, and that those who could not accept it usually did not. That is his clinical experience, not a controlled trial.

5 HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

When the pain flares, ask what is going on in your life, not what you lifted.

Sarno called this thinking psychologically. Instead of blaming a chair or a bend, the reader looks at the pressures of the past day or two: a deadline, a family duty, a resentment left unsaid. The journal on this page is built on that habit.

6

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

Fear of moving can keep the pain going.

Sarno thought warnings to avoid bending, lifting or sitting taught people to expect pain from those things, and so they got it. Once a medical exam had ruled out disease, he urged patients to drop the precautions and return to normal life. Talk to your own clinician before changing how you move.

7

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

A finding on a scan is not always the reason for the pain.

Sarno argued that disc changes and other findings often have nothing to do with the pain. Studies since then have found disc bulges on the scans of many adults who have no back pain at all. Your clinician is the person to say whether a finding on your scan matters.

8

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

If the feelings are left alone, the symptom may simply move somewhere else.

Sarno described other conditions he believed did the same job as TMS, such as tension headaches and some stomach complaints, and called them equivalents. In his view, treating one symptom physically while ignoring the emotions can leave room for another to appear.

9

HOURLIFE TAKEAWAY

You do not have to accept every detail of TMS to use its best idea: the brain shapes pain, and stress and fear can turn it up.

Sarno's proposed mechanism, reduced blood flow to the tissues, has not been confirmed, and mainstream medicine does not use TMS as a diagnosis. But today's pain science, including pain reprocessing therapy, also treats much chronic pain as something the brain can learn and unlearn. Readers often keep that part and leave the rest.

PUT IT TO WORK

Your action book

Do the setup steps once, then keep the habits going. The setup changes your week; the habits keep it changed after the first good one.

The download puts this whole reading and a printable action book in one PDF: the setup checklist, then a page of real calendar days for each habit, starting on the day you choose.

SET UP ONCE

- [ ] Get a full medical exam first
- [ ] Write your pressure list
- [ ] Sort your back rules
- [ ] Pick one activity to return to
- [ ] Set a five-minute evening check-in

KEEP UP DAILY

- ◯ Ask what is going on when it flares
- ◯ Write freely about what angers you
- ◯ Move without checking your back

30 days · Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Part two, after the reading, prints each of these as a page to fill in by hand.

THE LAST WORD

Before you go

Pick one step from the action book and do it today. An idea from a book starts to count once it changes what one ordinary day looks like.

PART TWO

The action book

Change the setup once, then keep it up. 5 setup actions to do once, and 3 habits to mark each day for 30 days.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026

Print it, or write on it in any PDF app.

SET UP ONCE

The setup checklist

Each of these is done once. Do one a day, and check it off when it is done.

- [ ] SETUP 1

Get a full medical exam first

See a doctor about your back and ask plainly whether anything needs treating, such as a fracture, an infection or a trapped nerve.

Go the same day for numbness in the groin, loss of bladder or bowel control, fever, unexplained weight loss or pain after an injury.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 2

Write your pressure list

Set aside 20 minutes and list everything pressing on you: work, family, money, health, and traits like perfectionism or needing to be liked.

Add old hurts you rarely think about.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 3

Sort your back rules

Write down every rule you follow about your back, such as no bending or no long drives.

Next to each, note who told you and whether your clinician still thinks it applies.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 4

Pick one activity to return to

With your clinician's agreement, choose one ordinary thing you have given up because of your back, like gardening or a short run.

Plan a small, easy first go at it this week.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

- [ ] SETUP 5

Set a five-minute evening check-in

Put a daily reminder in your phone for the same time each evening.

Use it to log your pain and what else happened that day in the journal on this page.

MY VERSION

DONE ON

DAILY HABIT 1 OF 3

Ask what is going on when it flares

When the pain rises, stop and ask what has bothered you in the last day or two, and what you did not say.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
16 ○	17 ○	18 ○	19 ○	20 ○	21 ○	22 ○
23 ○	24 ○	25 ○	26 ○	27 ○	28 ○	29 ○
30 ○						

December 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1 ○	2 ○	3 ○	4 ○	5 ○	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 2 OF 3

Write freely about what angers you

Two or three times a week, write for 15 minutes about whatever annoys, hurts or angers you, without being fair or polite.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
9 ○	10 ○	11 ○	12 ○	13 ○	14 ○	15 ○
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP

DAILY HABIT 3 OF 3

Move without checking your back

Walk, garden or play with the children without testing each twinge.

Nov 6 - Dec 5, 2026 · 30 days · circle each day you do it

SMALLEST VERSION

CUE

WHERE

November 2026

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
						1
2	3	4	5	6 ○	7 ○	8 ○
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December 2026

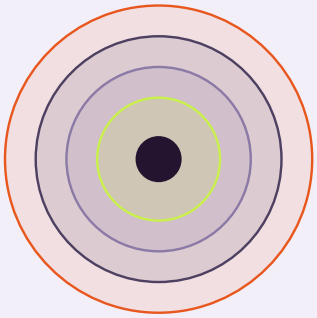
MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
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EACH FRIDAY

WHAT HELPED

WHAT GOT IN THE WAY

ONE CHANGE TO THE SETUP



Get checked first. Then, when it flares, look at your week as well as your back.

HOURLIFE NOTE AFTER JOHN E. SARNO