

As someone who's spent over a decade immersed in football's lower leagues—both as a player and now as a physio assistant—I've come to understand one harsh truth: pain in football and life isn't just about the body. It's also about how the brain and nervous system perceive it. Yet, when it comes to explaining something like central sensitisation—a key player in persistent or chronic pain—to partners or loved ones, it often feels like trying to speak a foreign language.

The challenge is that the culture around football often dismisses pain. "Just play through it," or "Man up," are phrases familiar to many. This stigma means that players and fans alike might not appreciate the complexity behind persistent pain, especially when imaging tests come back "normal." When you're trying to explain central sensitisation to your partner, you want to avoid sounding daft or like you're just making excuses. You want to be clear, approachable, and honest.

What Is Central Sensitisation? A Simple Explanation

To start, think of your body's pain system as an alarm system—not unlike the home security alarm you might have on your front door.

- **When there's actual danger:** A window breaks, the alarm sounds loud and clear.
- **Normal healing pain:** If you sprain an ankle or take a knock, the alarm system alerts you to protect the injury, then gradually quiets down as healing occurs.
- **Central sensitisation:** Imagine that alarm system becoming overly sensitive: even vibrations from passing trucks or a gust of wind set off blaring sirens, long after your house is safe.

This analogy is at the heart of central sensitisation. The "pain alarm system" in your nervous system is turned up too high. It's not a matter of "faking it" or ignoring real injury. Instead, the nerves and brain become more sensitive, and even harmless signals get interpreted as pain.

UK Anti-Doping (UKAD) touches on this in their persistent pain education guidance, highlighting how persistent pain involves changes in the nervous system's processing—not just tissue damage.

Why Is Central Sensitisation a Big Deal in Football?

Football culture glorifies toughness. Reporting pain can feel like admitting weakness, risking your spot on the team, or worse: earning criticism from coaches and fans. Unfortunately, this attitude compounds problems in two key ways:

1. **Imperfect Healing:** Football's cumulative pounding, sudden twists, and knocks don't always fully heal. Scarring, slight joint instability, or cartilage wear can linger without obvious symptoms initially.
2. **Cumulative Loading:** Week after week, season after season, the joints and muscles get stressed. Over time, minor injuries add up—the classic "wear and tear" leading to osteoarthritis. When combined with ongoing pain signalling changes, this leads to persistent pain beyond what scans show.

Many players end up with persistent knee pain that lasts months or years. It can affect performance, mood, and quality of life. Explaining why pain isn't [nhs cannabis prescription rare](#) just about "injury" but how the body's alarm system ramps up can help partners understand why you might still hurt long after the initial damage has healed.

Breaking Down the Mechanisms for Your Partner

Mechanism Explanation in Everyday Language Why It Matters Imperfect Healing Sometimes a knock or strain doesn't fully fix itself, like a small crack that doesn't close completely. Means the body might feel vulnerable and keeps sending pain signals to protect the area. Cumulative Loading Repeated pressure or stress on joints acts like slow wear-and-tear — imagine a door hinge rusting with use. Over time, this increases the risk of arthritis and ongoing discomfort. Central Sensitisation The pain alarm system becomes over-sensitive and starts reacting to harmless signals. This creates persistent pain that isn't always linked to new injuries.

What Changed in the Last 6 Weeks?

One tip I always give players and patients: when the pain sticks around longer than expected, ask yourself “What changed in the last 6 weeks?” Did you suddenly increase training? Start a new job with standing? Stop certain rehab exercises?

Central sensitisation often develops because the nervous system stays on high alert—sometimes triggered by new physical stress, sometimes by emotional or psychological factors like stress or frustration. Sharing this with your partner can make ongoing pain feel less mysterious and more manageable.

Active Rehab—Not Just “Rest It and See”

I hate the classic “just rest it” advice—it's vague and unhelpful. To manage persistent pain linked to central sensitisation, active rehab is key.



Graded Exercise

Instead of pushing hard or avoiding movement completely, graded exercise means gently and gradually increasing activity to rebuild confidence and tolerance.

Strengthening

Building muscle supports the joints and reduces strain, helping the body send clearer, less “painful” signals. It's like reinforcing the door hinge to prevent early rusting.



Pain Education

Understanding the “why” behind pain reduces fear. The UKAD guidance includes useful strategies for persistent pain education that help dismantle myths about pain being a sign of ongoing damage.

Medical Cannabis and Private Clinic Pathways—What's the Buzz?

With persistent pain, some explore options like medical cannabis. In the UK, access isn't straightforward due to legal and clinical restrictions, but some private clinics offer pathways for assessment, prescription, and monitoring.

If you're considering this, here are a few points to keep in mind:

- Medical cannabis is not a miracle cure; it might help manage pain symptoms but doesn't fix underlying issues.
- Private clinics require careful screening and ongoing review to avoid misuse.
- It's one piece of the puzzle—combining medical treatment with active rehab and education works best.

For more guidance, check out reputable sources or speak to your GP and physiotherapist. Don't just rely on online hype or anecdotal stories.

Putting It All Together: How to Talk With Your Partner Without Sounding Daft

Here's a simple script you might try when explaining central sensitisation:

“Pain is like an alarm. When we get injured, the alarm warns us to protect the body. But sometimes, the alarm system gets extra sensitive and keeps going off even when there's no new damage. It's not that I'm pretending or overreacting—my body just feels it like that. The good news is, with the right exercises and understanding, we can learn to turn the volume down on that alarm.”

Remember, your partner wants to understand and support you. Using clear, relatable analogies, focusing on what you're doing to improve things, and avoiding jargon keeps the conversation open and honest.

Final Thoughts

Central sensitisation isn't just a fancy medical term—it explains why persistent pain feels so frustrating, especially in the football world where reporting pain can be fraught with stigma.

By breaking down the pain alarm system analogy, highlighting how injuries and cumulative stress play a role, and emphasizing active rehab over vague rest advice, you can help your partner appreciate the reality behind your discomfort.

For anyone grappling with persistent pain, remember: you're not alone, it's not "all in your head," and sensible, patient rehab is your best bet for long-term management.

For more resources on pain education, take a look at the [UKAD persistent pain education guidance](#).

And if you're curious about medical cannabis or private clinic pathways, always seek advice from trusted healthcare professionals to weigh benefits and risks thoughtfully.

Keep moving smartly and stay positive—the pain alarm can be tuned down.