



All CCS and Cross-sectoral Spotlight All Europe Countries

A brief history of human pain

While pain is a universal human experience, our understanding of it has evolved dramatically. From ancient beliefs in invading demons to modern neuroscience, history reveals how deeply our culture and social beliefs shape how we suffer.

[Lars Arendt-Nielsen, Aalborg University](#)

Pain is one of the few things all of us experience, from stubbing a toe to waking up with an aching back; we can all relate to the feeling of being in pain.

Although [pain is a universal experience](#), the way we understand it has changed dramatically over time.

Ancient societies might have blamed pain on [demons entering the body](#) through the nose or ears, but we now know pain to be more about nerve endings and biology.

Cures have also moved on a lot. While our ancestors may have tried to [sneeze, vomit, or even urinate](#) out their pain, these days we're much more likely to take medications to ease our suffering.

Strange as these ancient “treatments” sound today, they do reveal something important about pain: that it's never just a physical sensation. Because throughout history, culture, religion and social beliefs have shaped how people talk about and respond to suffering — and many of those ideas still influence us to this day.

Indeed, after more than 30 years studying pain, one thing has become clear to me: while pain is universal, our experience of it is anything but.

Ancient pain

To understand the roots of how we think about pain today, it helps to go back and see how earlier cultures made sense of it.

In many ancient cultures, for example, people believed [pain was caused by external forces](#). Treatments relied on occult rituals, amulets, or trying to drain “bewitched” fluids from the body to expel such forces.

The ancient Egyptians believed that if you hadn’t obviously hurt yourself (so no broken bones, no visible wound), then clearly [something more sinister was at play](#). This could be the gods or perhaps a wandering spirit of death, which had decided to pay your body an unwelcome visit.

Ancient Egyptians treated wounds with honey and frog skin boiled in oil. [Meum Mare/Pexels, FAL](#)

Others tried to explain pain in more bodily, rather than spiritual, terms. The ancient Greeks, including physicians like Hippocrates, believed pain and disease arose when the body’s [“four humours”](#) — blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile — [fell out of balance](#). Healers would use plant and animal [remedies to try to restore harmony](#).

Moral judgement

By the middle ages, pain had taken on a moral and religious meaning.

Across Europe, [convents and monasteries often served as early hospitals](#) and had access to powerful pain-relieving substances such as opium. Yet pain was not always treated.

This is because many Christians believed [suffering to be a test of faith](#), while others saw it as a path to spiritual purification.

As a result, enduring pain was viewed as virtuous. So rather than seeking relief, sufferers were often encouraged to bear their discomfort with patience and devotion.

Echoes of these beliefs can still be seen today. For example, some women [choose to go without pain relief during childbirth](#) because of the idea that labour pain is a meaningful or a necessary part of the experience.

Toughing it out

Indeed, the idea that suffering should be endured hasn’t

disappeared as religion's influence has waned. In many societies, it has simply found a new home in philosophy.

If you've ever felt pressure to "tough it out" when you're ill or injured, you may recognise the influence of [stoicism](#). At its core is the idea that we cannot always control pain, but [we can control how we respond to it](#).

Some women still choose to refuse pain relief during labour due to their religious beliefs. [christinarosepix/Shutterstock](#)

In many parts of the world, to this day, enduring pain quietly can be seen as a sign of resilience and self-control, with [people often encouraged to minimise their discomfort](#) and avoid making a fuss. This is despite the fact that vocalisations of pain are a common way for [humans to bond](#), with research showing that [human exclamations of pain are similar](#) across the world.

So whether you like to express your pain or keep it on the down low, one thing is certain: the way we think about and even feel our pain has been directly influenced by human history.

And although most of us no longer blame demons or divine punishment for our aches and illnesses, we are still, in many ways, just trying to make sense of our suffering — much in the same way as our ancestors did.

Image: To understand the roots of how we think about pain today, it helps to go back and see how earlier cultures made sense of it. [Zwiebackesser/Shutterstock](#)
