



Skills to Cope with **Chronic Pain**

THE FIRST SKILL: Understanding

There are other resources with this handout which help to explain chronic pain and why it exists (ask your therapist for more details). Knowing how and why you have pain and how pain reacts with you and your environment is a vital skill in coping.

THE SECOND SKILL: Acceptance

Being able to realise the complex nature of your pain will help in acceptance. Acceptance is hard and by accepting you are not admitting defeat but rather embracing what is, what can and can't be changed and from that, being able to see a way forward.

THE THIRD SKILL: Calming

As discussed in our leaflet "Understanding Chronic Pain", your emotions can influence your pain experience. If you are constantly stressed and anxious about your pain, that heightened response in your body actually makes the pain seem worse. Ongoing high stress levels are also bad for your general health. An essential skill to develop is calming your body and mind. A sense of relaxation, lowers your stress levels which in turn can reduce your pain intensity.

Calming skills include:

1. Deep breathing
2. Meditation
3. Mindfulness
4. Yoga
5. Tai Chi

THE FOURTH SKILL: Balancing

You need to create a balanced and sustainable lifestyle, which will require some tools. Patients with pain who describe themselves as being successful in managing their pain all report that they have developed a pattern of living that works for them, but they also report being adaptable to episodes of pain.

Living with pain on a daily basis can be physically and emotionally exhausting, not just leaving you in severe discomfort but also influencing your mood and overall sense of wellbeing. There is an overwhelming amount of information out there on what to do, or not do, and so much advice that it can be hard to know where to start, so we've put the following resource together.

● **Pacing**

Pacing involves learning not to overdo activities. That is about doing a little bit at a time, not overdoing it, but staying busy. A balancing act. You want to be able to build slowly on how much you can do without having set-backs where subsequent days are spent in bed or having major pain flare-ups. Slow and steady wins the race. This can be tricky to start with. Be realistic about your abilities, even on the 'good' days don't push yourself too far as you know you will pay the price tomorrow.

● **Sleep**

This can be difficult as anxiety and pain can prevent you from sleeping, however sleep is the time when your body heals and recovers. It is also essential to better cope with emotions once rested. Many pain patients feel guilty about sleeping as they already feel they are not productive enough in the day. Sleep requires assertiveness (say no to helping do something and rather have a short rest), time management (an afternoon rest must be monitored, set an alarm for 1 hour), and goal setting (activity and rest must be balanced). If you have overdone it during the day, being unable to spend family time together in the evening can be upsetting – you have to structure rest periods into your day in order to cope.

● **Time Management**

Keeping an activity diary will help you figure out quite quickly what is too much and where you can do more. Time

management is essential to plan your week to ensure your work or tasks are done but that you still have enough energy left to enjoy some quality time and fun with family or friends. It allows you to consider breaking up larger tasks into a bunch of smaller ones spread over the day or even week, ensuring you don't overdo it and have a set-back. Knowing how much you can do each day of the week and weekends, planning in afternoon naps, knowing when you have meetings or appointments, dinner dates to attend or



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wanting to join friends for a morning walk will allow you to adjust your schedule so you know you can cope day after day. Know your limits and learn to 'say no' if necessary. Use a simple activity tracker to help you monitor your day.

● Goal Setting

Having goals will help you plan your day and activities to ensure you reach a daily goal. You can have short term goals to aim for over a matter of weeks or longer term goals to strive towards in the coming months. A short term goal may be wanting to plant the flower beds for spring, or being able to take the dog for a 20 minute walk. Using a pacing strategy you can build up to this slowly over time. The increments that you improve daily may be small and hard to recall, especially on the bad days, but over time staying focused on a goal gives you direction and purpose. Keeping a daily diary of your pain and activity will help you stay the course and achieve those goals.

THE FIFTH SKILL: Coping

That is, having tips, techniques, and plans to use when the pain is bad. You need more than just taking pain medication at these times.

1 Distraction and Visualisation

It sounds simple but creating a distraction from your pain can be really effective. Distraction can include knitting, painting, colouring, pottery etc. Watching television, playing video games, reading a book or listening to music can be a form of distraction. Visualisation is also a powerful tool. You focus your attention on any specific non-painful part of the body and alter the sensation in your mind, for example, imagine your hand warming up. This will take the mind away from focusing on the source of your pain.

2 Physical Therapy

Physical therapy including massage does not only have to be saved for when you are in pain. Having maintenance sessions will help regulate your pain levels. However during a flare-up pain can be relieved and your hypersensitivity reduced through therapy. There are many aspects to physical therapy treatment and how it can help manage your chronic pain.

3 Physical Activity

The importance of physical activity when living with chronic pain cannot be overstated. Gentle exercise, as difficult as it may sound, should be a central part of your treatment plan. Exercise keeps stiff joints lubricated and muscles strong. It's good for your mental and general health and helps maintain a good body weight. Get advice from your physical therapist about what activities you can do. Walking, swimming, gentle strength training, yoga and Pilates are all good ideas, even chair yoga could be an option if the thought of getting up off the floor is challenging.

4 Healthy Diet

Certain foods have anti-inflammatory and anti-oxidant properties which can be a natural way of reducing pain and promoting cellular health. A healthy diet will also help with weight control as your activity levels may be less than in the past. A combination of good eating habits and exercise will help manage your weight and make you feel better about yourself which in turn may help you coping with the pain more easily.

5 Change of Scenery

Even if you are not feeling up to it, getting out of the house, getting fresh air, walking around the block, doing an errand or anything that takes you into a different environment can help reduce your pain.

6 Support Groups

Until you join a support group you won't realise how helpful it can be to spend time with others like you in chronic pain. It's extremely helpful to know you are not alone, it may be a relief to be able to talk with others who "get it" and who know what you are going through. Sharing stories, ideas, concerns, frustrations, and hearing the same from others can be helpful.

7 Ask for Help

This may be one of the hardest things to accept and do. Know your limitations and get assistance when you can, trying to do something you know is hard will affect you later that day or evening. It may be simple like asking for a chair if you have been standing at a party for too long, or consider using a wheelchair when at the supermarket or airport. Or simply getting someone to help with chores at home occasionally.

8 Alternative Therapy

This may include acupuncture, hypnosis or Reiki for example. You may not know what works for you until you try it.

Pain management is often interpreted like a 3-legged stool. The legs being interventions, (including specific coping techniques, yoga, physical therapy, and exercise for example), medication and counselling. Without all three legs the stool will fall. As you learn to pace your activities, reach goals, relax, and find ways to cope with pain, you will begin to see the bigger picture, that pain does not have to be at the centre of your life.



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