

Managing Activities

I expect that you have seen quite a change in the types and amount of activity that you can do since having chronic pain. There may be things that you struggle with, and other things that you can't do at all.

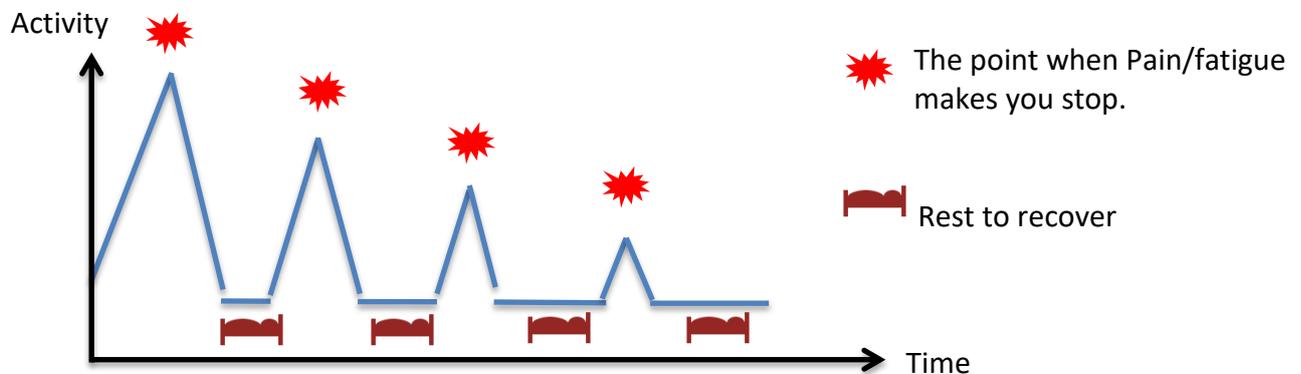
We know that pain is due to an oversensitive nervous system including an over-protective brain. One of the problems with an oversensitive system is that when we try and do more activity, our brain doesn't like it because it thinks we are danger, so it tries to protect us with more pain.



You may have tried pushing through the pain, but I am guessing this has just made things worse!

How do you decide when it's time to stop doing something? Is it when the pain or fatigue gets so bad that you can't go on? That is a very common way to do things, but unfortunately if you have an overprotective brain, that approach just makes everything worse! Your brain tries to stop you doing anything it thinks will hurt you and gives you more pain – even sooner.

Unfortunately, over time, our brain becomes so good at protecting us that we can do less and less before the pain comes on and we take longer and longer to recover.



So what is the answer? The good news is that we can calm down our sensitive nervous system and retrain our brain to be less protective. The bad news is that this takes time and perseverance!

There are some specific ways that can help you to retrain your brain to cope better with activity.

- Pacing
- Planning
- Prioritising



Creazilla
EmojiOne project

Occupational Therapy for People with Chronic Pain

Pacing

You may have been told, “you must pace yourself”. But what does that actually mean, and why is it important?

Pacing is a way of calming down the brain by stopping activities BEFORE your body (pain/fatigue) tells you to. This is VERY difficult to do because it doesn't feel natural to stop when you feel like you can go on. But by pushing until pain tells you to stop, you are causing your brain to become MORE protective which will mean you will get pain even sooner.



To pace your activities, you should try and do small amounts of activity with frequent rest breaks. This takes a bit of trial and error as it means trying to work out how long you can do an activity before your pain gets worse. We call this your baseline. It's the starting point which you can build on.

EXAMPLE

Jenny finds that if she stands for 5 minutes her pain increases, so she has decided she will only stand for 4 minutes before having a break. She wants to do the washing up and has worked out that she can wash 10 items in 4 minutes. So, after washing 10 items, she sits down at the kitchen table for a couple of minutes and then gets up and does another 10 items.



EXAMPLE

Mark works in an office but struggles to sit for more than 15 minutes. After sitting at his desk for 14 minutes, he gets up and stands behind his chair for 30 seconds before sitting down again for another 14 minutes.

Pacing is also about varying the types of activity you do. Activities all have different types of demands – physical, cognitive, social and emotional. Activities that you can do sitting down, for example sorting out your banking, might be less physically demanding than say, cleaning, but will be cognitively demanding because of the amount of concentration you need. Using your brain can be just as exhausting as using your body!

EXAMPLE

John has found that he can dust for 10 minutes comfortably and then sits down to do paperwork for 20 minutes. He then carries on with the dusting for another 10 minutes before having a rest or doing another task sitting down.



Planning and Prioritising

We often have routines of activities that we do when we are well, that don't always work for us when we have pain and fatigue. It is good to stop and think about what we are doing, when and how we are doing it.

If possible, it is good to spread out activities over the day and week. You probably can't do everything that you want to do, so think about the activities that are most important and make them a priority. Perhaps some jobs don't need to be done so often.

Have you ever started a job and then struggled to finish it? Perhaps you have pushed yourself to get it done? It is really hard to leave a job not finished, which means we can be tempted to push through until it's done and then suffer later. If you think about breaking down jobs into smaller tasks it may be easier to stop when you need to.

There are lots of jobs that we do that could be broken down into smaller chunks and spread across the day or week.

EXAMPLE

In the past Barbara cleaned her bathroom everyday but now she struggles to cope with it. She has decided that she only really needs to do it all once a week, and just clean the toilet and sink twice a week. She broke it down into four tasks: toilet + bath/shower + sink + tiles. She now cleans each item on different days rather than all on the same day. Her weekly plan looks like this:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Toilet	shower	sink	toilet	tiles	sink	rest

This way her bathroom is completely cleaned each week – but it doesn't all have to be done on the same day.

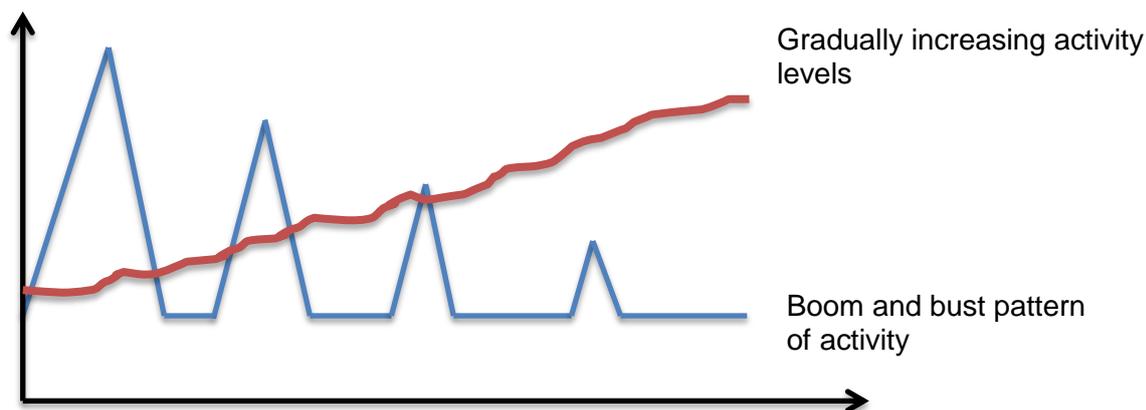
EXAMPLE

Mary struggles to get the dinner ready for her family. By the time it gets to the time to prepare it, she is already exhausted. Her children also come home from school and want her attention. She now breaks down the preparation into smaller chunks and spreads it throughout the day. For example, she can prepare the vegetables at different times in the day. This means that she has much less to do when it comes to dinner time. She also makes larger amounts so that she can freeze some for those days when she really doesn't feel up to doing anything.

Occupational Therapy for People with Chronic Pain

How can I do more?

In order to calm down the oversensitive nervous system, we have to start by working within our pain limits – not pushing through them. But this isn't the end of the story! The whole point is that as your brain becomes less protective you can start to do more without it over-reacting.



When you feel you have got your activity levels more even, then you can start to gradually increase by **very small amounts** at a time.

Examples: Jenny and Mark (see earlier example)

EXAMPLE

Mark wants to increase the amount of time he can sit at his desk. He can manage 15 minutes comfortably but then starts to increase to 16 minutes before getting up. He does that for a week and as his pain hasn't got worse, he increases again to 17 minutes.



EXAMPLE

Jenny wants to increase the amount of time she can wash up for. So once she can do 10 items comfortably, she increases to 11 items. After a few days, she increases again to 12 items.



Mark and Jenny can continue to build up the amount of time they stand or sit gradually. If their pain increases, they can just go back to the previous stage and they can try and slowly increase again.

Over to You

Think of some activities that you could try to pace. Write down how long you normally do this for. Then time how long it is before your pain starts to get worse. What would be a good baseline?

Activity	How long I do it for now	How long before my pain/fatigue gets worse	Baseline
Eg. Washing up	Until it's finished! (About 15 minutes)	5 minutes	4 minutes