

# Gain Control Over Chronic Pain

GOOD SELF-CARE CAN REDUCE PAIN AND LIFT EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING



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Pain is more than a physical problem; it can have a major impact on emotional well-being. People in pain — whether acute or chronic — can develop depression, anxiety and other emotional struggles when pain affects their ability to function and their quality of life. In addition, people who suffer from anxiety or depression often experience pain more intensely. This can turn into a vicious cycle.

Improving emotional well-being, on the other hand, can help people reduce pain, and reducing pain can improve emotional well-being — a much more positive cycle. Several strategies can help you set this cycle into motion.

One of the most important objectives in pain management is to develop “self-efficacy” — that is, the ability to feel that you have some control over your pain. Developing self-efficacy begins with good self-care. The following self-care strategies can help you begin to take control, and ultimately reduce your pain.

## **Pace yourself**

Trying to cope with continuous pain can be exhausting; it's important to find the right combination of activity and rest. Over-doing it can increase pain, but so can under-doing it. For example, staying in bed too long causes stiffness, which increases inflammation, which makes pain worse.

Moving your body increases blood flow, reduces inflammation and helps reduce the intensity of pain. Gentle yoga, water aerobics, walking and tai chi may help. Be sure to assess your pain level regularly and adjust your activity accordingly. If daily tasks such as showering, cooking and household chores aggravate your pain, prioritize tasks with the understanding that not all of them have to be done every day. Do as much as you're able while acknowledging your limits.

## **Eat to nourish your body**

Eating nutritious food plays an important role in pain management. Both under-eating and over-eating can worsen pain. Some specific foods also may affect



your pain, energy or stiffness. Keeping a food diary may help you identify eating patterns that make you feel better or worse.

### Prioritize sleep

In another vicious cycle, pain can make it difficult to sleep, and poor sleep can make it harder to manage pain. To sleep better, try to maintain a consistent bedtime and wake time, limit daytime napping, minimize caffeine and alcohol, reduce screen time (TV, computers, etc.) in the evening, create a relaxing sleep environment, and find a more comfortable position that eases your pain in bed.

### Try new coping strategies

- Progressive muscle relaxation: tensing and relaxing individual muscles in a sequence — for example, from your toes to your neck — can reduce pain caused by muscle guarding and tension.
- Belly breathing: shifting from shallow, upper-chest breathing to deeper breaths that fill your belly and lungs can help you feel calm and less anxious.
- Mindfulness: this powerful mental skill can help you dwell less on past losses and future worries and more on the present moment and what you can do, right now, to be proactive about reducing pain.

### Seek support

Chronic pain can make you feel isolated and misunderstood, which compounds emotional distress. It's important to stay connected to family members and friends who are genuinely invested in your well-being. Consider joining a pain-management peer-support group to connect with people who understand your experience of pain. A psychotherapist also can help you broaden your coping skills, gain some control over pain and emotional distress and build self-efficacy.

Many of the tips I've shared come from the excellent book, *Master Your Pain: A Comprehensive Science-Based Method to Help You Live Well with Chronic Pain*, by Jill B. Fancer. I highly recommend it. 

# Q&A: Getting Back in the Game after an Injury

STEVEN NAKANO, PHYSICAL THERAPIST

## Q: HOW ACTIVE SHOULD I BE AFTER AN INJURY?

Pain that comes on suddenly and limits your activity should be looked at by your health care provider. With minor injuries, however, many of us like to take a wait-and-see approach.

After trying RICE (rest, ice, compression, elevation) for sprains and strains, however, the next step may be unclear. Should you keep resting, or just act normally and ignore the pain? The answer lies somewhere in between — we call it “active rest.”

Get your body moving as soon as it's comfortable — that may mean putting up with a little discomfort, but no more than a 3 on a pain scale of 1-10. With active rest, the goal is to find the right amount of activity that your body will tolerate as it heals, so your activity level can progress along with your healing.

If you can't find a comfortable level of activity when using the injured joint or muscle, choose activities that don't involve that area. If it hurts your ankle to stand, for example, then sit and use hand weights. If your hand hurts, walk more.

## Q: I'M AFRAID TO BE MORE ACTIVE BECAUSE I'M AFRAID IT WILL CAUSE MORE PAIN. HOW CAN I GET PAST THAT?

Understanding how pain works can help. When your brain perceives a physical threat (an injury to your knee, for example), it sends you a message — pain — to stop you from doing anything that might cause further damage. As you've seen, it works —

the pain stops you from doing any more of that activity. Unfortunately, your fear of receiving more pain messages is often enough to stop you from activities that might actually help your knee.

To get past that, you can send messages back to your brain to lower the perceived threat level. One way is to exercise at a level that keeps pain low and tolerable. Another way is to reduce your overall stress level. Massage, topical rubs, meditation — essentially, anything that feels good and doesn't significantly increase the threat to your injury can influence your brain to back away from the pain trigger. Some of the tips for chronic pain on pages 1-2 also may help.

## Q: WHAT IF THE JOINT STARTS TO FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE?

As you progressively increase your activity, you may run into physical limitations such as joint tightness, tingling or weakness. Fear of doing damage or of doing the “wrong thing” may also stop your progress. You can stretch, massage and exercise your way through some of these barriers.

If pain increases, slow down and take it easy for a bit, but then get right back at it. If something is stopping you from moving forward, then it may be time to get some help. A physical therapist can help you safely move past the barriers and get back into game form. 

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