



Coping with pain at its worst

Many people who have chronic pain have times when their pain becomes more intense. **Episodes of intense pain can be called flare-ups, set backs or bad days.** These refer to an increase in your usual pain rather than new pain sensations in new parts of your body.

1. What tends to happen?

Flare-ups can happen very quickly or more gradually over a period of time. For many people, coping with flare ups is very difficult. These increases in pain are often associated with a reduction in activity, cutting yourself off from others, bed rest, more disturbed sleep, more concentration difficulties, more irritability and frustration, negative and unpleasant thoughts, depressed mood, and feeling overwhelmed and desperate.

When pain is at its worst, the psychological effect can also be at its worst.

2. Negative and unhelpful thinking

All too often, when pain is bad, people begin to have negative and unhelpful thoughts and dwell on unpleasant things.

Some examples of negative and unhelpful thinking are:

“I cannot stand this pain any longer”

“Why can’t doctors do something for me?”

“Whatever I do I have pain so what’s the point?”

“It’s terrible and I’m never going to get any better”

“Life isn’t worth living like this”

Thoughts can focus on a number of areas; how pain has affected your life, concerns about the future and getting worse, “if only...” thoughts, going over the circumstances which brought about the pain problem (for example accidents or injuries), your medical care, a sense of unfairness of having pain and of your life being changed in ways that you do not want.

It is common and natural to have such thoughts when pain is at its worst and most debilitating. Such thoughts can, however, be negative, destructive and self-defeating on your pain experience. Although these types of thoughts are common, they do not have a good effect on you nor do they help you cope with pain.

3. What to expect

Flare-ups are a normal experience when living with chronic pain.

Your pain level is very likely to vary over time. It is important to accept that setbacks will happen; so don't be surprised or think that it is a catastrophe. Flare-ups sometimes happen because you have chosen to do something knowing you will "pay for it later" with an increase in resulting pain. Sometimes the price you pay is worthwhile because of the enjoyment or sense of achievement. These flare-ups that occur as a result of your choices are usually easier to deal with mentally; if an increase in pain is the result of some activity you may realise the pain will eventually ease, but when your pain increases out of the blue, people often find this more difficult to deal with.

A setback, however it came about, is not a signal to give up on trying to cope but is a problem to be dealt with. Setbacks are when you really need to help yourself mentally. Your usual ways of coping might not work so well but don't give up and don't panic! Instead, look for positive ways of coping.

4. Prevention of flare-ups

Prevention is obviously the preferred approach to managing flare-ups and it assumes that pain is under some degree of control through a person's actions. Episodes of intense pain are not always random, unpredictable or out of a person's control.

Pain triggers:

To be able to prevent flare-ups, we need to know what causes them. **Pain triggers can be defined as any situation, event or activity that is associated with, or which causes an increase, in the intensity of pain.** Sometimes there may be a time delay between the trigger and the start of the flare up.

Some triggers are easily identifiable but are difficult to prevent. For example: sudden unexpected movements, unavoidable accidents, and hot and cold weather. However the majority of pain triggers are controllable and generally fall into the one of two categories:

1. Triggers related to physical activity; for example, remaining too long in one position, overdoing activities, certain movements or actions, exceeding physical limitations
2. Triggers related to tension, stress and emotional upset

Warning signs:

Some people are able to identify warning signs when a flare-up is about to happen; for example:

- A gradual increase in pain intensity over a period of time
- Taking more painkillers
- Feeling more irritable
- Spending more time shutting yourself off from others
- Specific physical sensations

Warning signals act as cues to take preventative action. A continued escalation of pain can be prevented by using strategies for managing pain.

By being aware of pain triggers and warning signs, it is often possible to work out and put into practice strategies to prevent further increases of pain. This can put you back in control.

Think about your personal pain triggers and warning signs and note them down below:

Pain triggers:

Pain warning signs:

5. What to aim to do when a flare-up occurs

First, **be realistic or else you are likely to experience a sense of frustration and failure.** Getting rid of the pain is usually an unrealistic goal. Some reduction in pain intensity is more realistic. Another aim during an episode of increased pain is to cope mentally. During flare-ups, people often experience unpleasant feelings and have negative thoughts. Preventing or dealing with these is an important part of managing a flare-up.

Remember, what you do and how you react can make a difference to:

- **how often you have a bad phase**
- **how long it lasts**
- **how severe it is at the time**
- **your mood and attitude**

There are 3 general strategies that can be used to manage intense pain episodes and these are:

- reactions to the pain
- changing the sensory experience
- distraction

Combinations of strategies are recommended, and remember that what helps one person may not help another. You will need to work out what suits you best.

6. Reactions to the pain experience

When people have an episode of intense pain they often have a strong reaction. Typically intense pain is viewed as very intrusive, distressing, frustrating or even as an overwhelming event. However, there are other attitudes that can be taken which may be more helpful. **There is no right way of reacting but being aware of different approaches can give you a choice.** Here are some suggestions:

a) Pain as a teacher or reminder

An episode of intense pain can be seen as a message from the body to put into practice strategies to reduce the pain so you can return to your more usual levels of activity. **You may have something that you can learn from a flare-up.** For example, you may have exceeded your physical limitations, or you may benefit from working out how to alter the ways you undertake certain jobs around the house.

b) Pain as an enemy

Pain can be seen as the enemy. You cannot get rid of pain completely. You cannot defeat or destroy the enemy. **Instead the fight can be seen as a game of tactics and manoeuvres with the aim being that you keep the pain enemy from getting the upper hand.**

What is pain trying to do to you? Get you upset, angry, irritable; make you feel depressed, helpless, useless; interfere with your life and stop you doing things you can still enjoy; make you feel isolated and cause friction at home? When pain is bad, it is more likely to succeed in having these effects. Pain is not an enemy to be hated. It needs to be fought skilfully if you want to gain the upper hand. Don't give up and do nothing when you have a flare up. Instead, work on strategies for rolling with pain.

c) Flare-ups as something to manage and work with

Essentially this approach is about accepting that you are having a flare-up, but not allowing it to be overwhelming.

A good metaphor for a flare-up is a storm. Storms cannot be stopped; instead they have to be weathered. What you can do is to seek shelter, prevent damage, survive and stay as comfortable as possible whilst the storm is raging. When the storm ends there can be a sense of relief.

Remember that episodes of intense pain are time limited. It is easy to lose sight of this at the time of a flare up. A flare-up can be viewed as having a beginning and an end; it may begin or end abruptly, or gradually. The one thing you can be fairly sure of during a flare-up is

that it won't last forever. Try not to give yourself a hard time when having a flare-up. Instead try to focus on coping with the pain and working towards getting better as soon as possible.

7. Changing the sensory experience

a) Use of medication - You will need to seek advice specific for yourself but general advice is as follows:

- If you are taking tablets make sure you are taking a regular dosage during a bad episode. Don't try and wait as long possible before taking a tablet.
- Take your medications prescribed. Even if you have stopped taking regular medication, drugs can be useful during a flare-up of pain.
- If in doubt about your medication, consult with your doctor.
- Talk with your doctor about reducing medication once the pain has settled down
- Work out a plan with your doctor about how to use medication during a flare-up.

b) Reducing activities which make pain worse - This may be by resting in bed, lying down, standing up, changing positions or retiring to a quiet room. This may be helpful in the short term but prolonged bed rest or lying down is not helpful for more than a few days.

c) If you do have bed-rest, after 2 to 3 days start to mobilise slowly - Set yourself some simple targets for example simple walking in the home, not involving bending, or do some gentle stretching exercises. By pacing yourself and setting yourself achievable goals you can gradually become more active again.

d) Counter stimulation - Examples include rubbing or massaging painful areas. Using heat such as hot showers or baths, heat pads, ice packs and TENS machines.

e) Distraction - Distraction is a highly effective way of reducing awareness of pain. Distraction is harder as pain becomes more intense but it remains a valuable strategy when trying to manage pain. It may be very difficult when pain is severe but any degree of distraction can result in less awareness of pain. Doing nothing and thinking about your pain will only make you more aware of your pain; this will probably make you feel worse. By trying to distract yourself, you are at least allowing the possibility of this being helpful.

You may need to give careful consideration as to what distracting activities you may use during an intense pain episode. **The following points are useful to bear in mind:**

- The activity should be one that is physically achievable and not likely to make the pain worse.

- The amount of concentration something requires should be thought about. Doing something that requires too much or too little concentration when your pain is quite intense may not work very well as a distraction.
- People often find that doing anything for very long when they have a high level of pain is difficult. What can be more helpful is having a variety of things you can do for short periods at a time and then go on to something else. If you do something for too long, this may put excessive strain on parts of your body as well as affect your concentration.
- Most importantly, have a variety of distracting activities that you can use. If you cannot get on with something try not to get discouraged; instead, try something else.
- There are many ways of distracting yourself but here are a few examples of what some people have used when pain is intense: breathing control, reading aloud, listening to music, humorous books or TV programmes, having conversations, planning and imagining how you might change your garden, remembering enjoyable holidays or days out, having a hot bath, jigsaws, counting the number of bricks in a wall (boring but can focus attention!). The list is endless!

8. Dealing with unhelpful thoughts during a flare-up

As has already been said, **it is common and natural to have negative and unhelpful thoughts when pain is at its worst**. Whilst it may be difficult not to have any negative thoughts, it can help if you at least try to think and talk to yourself in a constructive manner. This can encourage hope that you can manage a flare-up. This is a way of trying to “psych yourself through times of intense pain”.

You will need to develop your own words and phrases that help you. Here are some examples that you may find useful:

“I know it hurts right now but I have been through this before. I know I can handle it because this will settle in time”.

“Stay calm, and relaxed. Tension isn’t going to help. Keep breathing slowly and deeply”.

“The pain is quite bad now, but I can get the better of this and stay positive. I must remember what I have done in the past which has helped to distract me for a while”.

It may well be a challenge to be very positive and optimistic during a flare-up. However, it is important to try and reduce the amount of negative and unpleasant thoughts. These will only make you feel worse when you already have a lot to deal with.

9. Pain and your box of tools

Remember that to deal with pain you need a good “box of tools”. **The more tools you have, the more likely you will find a tool to help with the task in hand.** If one tool is not effective on a particular occasion, do not get discouraged, try another tool. Remember that some jobs require a “hammer” and others require “precision tools”. To make good use of tools, practice is needed. “Tools” might include tablets; pacing, planning and prioritising activities; relaxation techniques; self-hypnosis; distraction; positive attitudes...

At a time when you are not experiencing a flare-up, spend some time thinking about how you would manage one. What might you do, how might you react, what would be most helpful? What may be your best tools to deal with your pain?

During a period of increased pain it will be helpful to feel prepared.

Whenever you notice an increase in pain severity:

1. Stay calm

- Panic is catastrophising and will only make things worse but remaining calm will help to manage pain.
- Challenge any negative catastrophising thoughts.

2. Stop and think

- What have you been doing – have you been overdoing it?
- What can I do now?

3. Next steps

- Stop what you have been doing, have a short break or look for something else to do for a while. For example, spend five minutes (or more) practising my relaxation technique, make yourself a drink or call a friend for a chat – but try to talk about other topics rather than pain.
- Make sure you challenge and stop any negative thoughts. Be realistic. Tell yourself “I know I can’t make the pain go away completely, but I can cope with it, I’ve coped with it before, I can do it again. I know it won’t stay like this for too long”.
- If need be, cut down on planned activities for that day, but don’t cut them out completely.

4. When the pain starts to ease

- Spend some time reviewing how you coped this time. What did you do well? Praise yourself for what you did. What could you do better next time? Perhaps it means it might be worth pacing your activities differently. Perhaps you overdid what you were doing before the pain increased. Use that as a guide for next time.

To remember these points it may help to write down the headings on a piece of paper or card and carry it with you.

Things to remember about a flare-up

- Stay calm! Episodes of more intense pain are a normal part of the experience of chronic pain. Flare-ups will happen.
- A flare up is not a time to give up. It is a problem to be dealt with, even though it might be a challenge.
- Have a plan about how you are going to manage a flare up (think about this when you're not having one).
- Remember your "box of tools".
- Be realistic. You can aim to reduce pain and cope mentally (hoping for no pain is not usually realistic).
- Tackle those negative, unhelpful, self defeating thoughts. They will only make you feel worse.
- If you need to, take a complete rest, but only for two to three days. Start to mobilise slowly by setting yourself some simple goals.
- Try to relax with whatever method is best for you. Remember that tension just makes pain worse.
- Plan and discuss with your doctor how best to use medication, during and after a flare-up.
- Managing pain is a skill; the more you practise the better you will be.

**Health Psychology Service
February 2012**

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