

Planning For Chronic Pain

Pain is a signal in the body whose purpose is to alert us to the presence of physical damage. Our adaptive response to this signal is to stop and desist in the activities that produce the pain in order to allow the body to heal. When pain becomes chronic, the signal no longer has any meaning. The pain persists after the physical injury has healed and has in effect become “burnt into” the nervous system. By its definition, chronic pain is life-long. There is as yet no cure for chronic pain (although we are always hopeful that advances in medicine will find a cure someday). The key to chronic pain is management or altering the relationship with the pain. The goal of chronic pain management is to maximize the quality of life through increasing pleasurable activities. The key to chronic pain management is Planning and Pacing.

Planning in chronic pain involves knowing triggers (and avoiding them) while increasing pleasurable activities. Part of planning is being realistic about the amount of activity one can do. It also involves increasing exercise to combat the deconditioning (getting out of shape) that often occurs when people experience pain and reduce activities.

1. Reduce stress through the use of physical relaxation techniques such as deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation.
2. Get adequate sleep.
3. Reduce stress through thinking strategies (coping statements) found in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy.
4. Increase exercise in a controlled environment to increase muscle strength and endurance as well as cardiovascular tone.
5. Determine what activities are most important to your quality of life and life satisfaction.
6. Spend time doing pleasurable activities and expend limited pain-free time engaged in those activities, not wasted on “maintenance” activities. For example, spend time engaged in a favourite hobby as opposed to doing dishes, ironing or mowing the lawn.
7. Delegate maintenance tasks whenever possible.
8. Delegate any task that causes a great deal of pain (e.g. snow removal). There are some activities that just can NOT be accomplished without a consequence of a great deal of pain and/or many days spent in bed afterwards. These activities MUST be avoided.
9. Plan rest time after short periods of activity.
10. Plan rest days before or after major events (e.g. weddings).
11. Take pain medication before an activity to counteract pain before it surfaces. This will ultimately require less medication than if you wait to experience the pain and THEN take meds to deaden it.

Adapted from Psychological Approaches to Pain Management, Turk and Gatchel (2002)