

Tips for Coping with Chronic Pain

Developed by Westboro Village Health Group 2009

1. **Breathe into your stomach.**

Slow deep breaths drawing the breath into the abdomen to a count of 4 or 5, holding for a count of 4, then out for a count of 4 or 5, and then hold for a count of 4. Repeat this cycle for at least 2 minutes. This is how long it takes the body to turn off the stress response and turn on the relaxation response. This breathing exercise helps to relax the muscles, turn off irritants to inflamed areas like adrenalin, and improve blood circulation throughout the body.

2. **Pace your activities.**

As much as possible stay active. Pace activities so rest is incorporated into your schedule to minimize pain build-up. Rest between activities. Vary your routine, alternate easier activities with more challenging activities. On high pain days, continue to be active but increase the rest periods.

3. **Use pain management tools.**

Heat and ice often help with pain. Your physiotherapist, physician, or kinesiologist can advise you on what will help you the most. Moist heat works better than dry heat. Taking a break during an activity to use heat/ice can lower pain levels. If you are using pain medications, take them as prescribed rather than waiting until the pain is excruciating. Remember it takes less medication to manage your pain than it does to get out of pain once your pain levels are high.

4. **Find Alternative ways to do things that irritate your condition or cause undo pain.**

An example would be to put clothing in a cloth bag and toss it down the stairs to the laundry room. Use a light weight vacuum cleaner. Put one foot up on a footstool when standing at the sink.

5. **Use pain control postures.**

Ask your physiotherapist, exercise therapist, or physician to help you identify positions in which the pressure to the affected muscles and/or joints, is minimized and supported. This will help lower stress-related pain.

6. **Manage what you say to yourself about your pain.**

Speak to yourself about pain in ways that are realistic (avoid all-or-nothing statements, 'what ifs', and extreme thinking). Acknowledge your pain. Ask yourself what you can do that will help or how you can best care for yourself. Do those things and keep reassuring yourself that you are doing what you can. Check in with yourself to see if the things you are doing help. Tell yourself that you will get through it! (Hint: What would say and do for a child who had pain?)

7. **Set yourself up for a good night's sleep.**

The most important thing you can do is to get up at the same time each morning. Do not nap. A warm bath or shower about an hour before going to bed will help set your body's thermostat for sleep. Go to bed on a supportive but comfortable mattress and use a supportive pillow. Keep worries out of your bed by actively problem-solving during the day. Remind yourself that you did all you could today and that you will work on problems in the daytime. Distract yourself from worries by recalling a positive event in your recent past – detail by detail, or read a book you have read previously. If your sleep cycle is off, try getting more exercise each day for a few days. The increase in activity should tire you and help to reset your sleep cycle. If you continue to have trouble sleeping tell your physician. Sleep is essential for healing!

8. *Get the medical and emotional support you need.*

You may need to see your family doctor, a physiotherapist, massage therapist, or exercise therapist. Speaking to your pharmacist may help. Ask for practical and emotional support from family or friends. Find a support group or join a chat room so that you can express yourself and learn about additional resources.

9. *Avoid irritants.*

Caffeine, alcohol, and sugar are irritants to the system and increase tension and pain.

10. *Enjoy yourself.*

Make a list of things you can do despite your pain. Try to have 10-15 things on the list. Pleasure is a good antidote to pain and changes brain chemistry in ways that lower pain.