

Coping with setbacks

Setbacks in pain control can be both distressing and frustrating for most people, but they are very normal when you experience chronic pain. Many factors contribute to an increase in pain due to activation of a sensitized nervous system without there being any injury / damage to the tissues. It is important to be aware of these factors and to be able to recognize them.

FACTORS THAT COULD CONTRIBUTE TO FLARE-UPS:

1. Lack of knowledge / understanding of your symptoms:

As human beings, we have a fundamental need to know what is going on with us. When we are not sure why things are happening to us, it adds stress, anxiety and fear, which are like pouring gasoline on an open flame for people with chronic pain and a sensitized nervous system.

2. The time of the year can influence our normal routine and activity levels:

During Spring people become more active, which might mean a sudden increase in activities, whereas during the winter months, people tend to take on a more sedentary lifestyle. Both can alert the body's nervous/ alarm system and lead to an increase in pain.

3. Physical overload or lack of movement:

There are two common mistakes people make when it comes to daily activities and exercise:
 "No pain, no gain": in this scenario, people fight pain. They go as hard as they can and then they crash. This is referred to as the "boom-bust cycle" and leads to an increase in pain over time and increased time needed to recover.
 "If it hurts, don't do it": In this scenario, people avoid any discomfort and are focused on pain. They become more afraid of pain and over time get more sensitive to normal movement.

A happy medium between no exercise and too much exercise is what to strive for.

3. Changes in your general health:

Your immune system might be reacting to injury, infection or psychological distress. Immune molecules called cytokines are found in a mobile protective system circulating inside the body. Some cytokines promote inflammation and some try to stop it, so the aim is to have them in balance. During a flu attack, there will be more of the pro-inflammatory cytokines around because the immune system is activated to fight the flu. This commonly translates to making your normal movements more sensitive and occasionally old pains may come back to revisit.

"TOOLKIT" FOR MANAGING FLARE-UPS:

You may already be managing flare-ups with some of the tools below, but perhaps there are some you didn't know could be helpful or that you haven't tried before. If you are not sure how to implement some of the tools, discuss it with your physiotherapist for guidance.

1. Improve your knowledge about pain:

Understanding how pain works helps to decrease the fear / threat that pain represents for you, turning down the body's alarm system and decreasing your pain. There are many good books that explain how pain works, for example Adriaan Louw's, "Why do I hurt", and David S. Butler's, "Explain

4. Stress:

Hormones like adrenalin have many functions in the body which can be extremely useful in the short term, as your brain decides whether to fight or fly from potential danger. This is an on/off system - quickly activated and then returning to normal once the stressful situation has gone. Chronic pain and stress are usually associated with persistently raised levels of adrenalin. Adrenalin doesn't usually cause pain by itself, but with a little help from changes in movement and a heightened alarm system, sensitivity, it can magnify the danger message and cause pain.

5. Emotional Overload:

Emotionally, we can handle day-to-day stresses, but if we get overwhelmed, we get overloaded. Think of your emotions as water in a cup. If we fill the cup with water it will steadily fill. If we keep filling it, it will eventually overflow. Once our emotions overflow, our alarm system activates, ramping up and increasing pain. The good thing is that we can empty the cup with strategies to deal with our negative emotions and stressors. By recognizing stressful or emotional issues that may have triggered the pain, it may ease some unnecessary fear and anxiety, but also guide you in controlling similar emotions in the future.

6. Poor sleep:

The National Sleep Foundation recommends adults sleep between seven to nine hours a day. Sleep is important and sleep deprivation has been linked to increased rates of pain. Just one or two nights of disturbed sleep can sensitize your nervous system and increase pain.

The wonderful thing about your nervous system is that simply by identifying these factors and understanding that your increase in pain is due to your nervous system being more sensitive and not because of an increase in damage, you can turn down your alarm system and decrease pain.



Pain". If you have access to the internet, you can look at the Links page on our website where you can find videos about pain: www.paardevleipainprogram.co.za

2. Re-set realistic long and short term value-based goals:

Values are like directions on a compass, they are never "achieved", but they can influence the quality, and clarify the purpose, of your life journey. They are important to you and bring meaning to your life. Values can be principles, standards, qualities or activities that you consider worthwhile and may include: Family / friendships, spiritual/religious beliefs, work/career, health/well-being, education/learning and pleasure/leisure.

GETTING

Goals can be thought of as stepping stones that move you in line with your values. They might include work, relationships, hobbies or leisure activities.
Goal setting: Think in terms of something to move towards, for example "I want to be creative" as opposed to something to move away from, such as "I don't want this illness".

Example:
 My value: I want to be a good friend.
 My goal: To phone my friend once a week.

1. Start with something you would enjoy doing.
2. Start by setting one goal for the week and increase your goals one at a time.
3. Choose something that is realistic and achievable (Confidence level should be at 7.)
4. Write it down.

5. Increase your goals slowly by no more than 10-20% every week.
6. Re-evaluate your goals after a week and then on a regular basis. Did you achieve what you set out to do? If not, then ask yourself what you could have done differently.
6. Congratulate and reward yourself for all your achievements no matter how big or small.

3. Become more active, but pace yourself:

Moderate aerobic exercise can decrease chronic pain but remember that your nerves are more sensitive and that when movement takes place, they will send messages to your brain. These are messages of sensitivity and NOT of injury. As you develop more knowledge and reap the benefits of aerobic exercise, the sensitivity will decrease and you will be able to do more without being in more pain. Remember hurt does not equal harm to the tissues. Exercise doesn't just improve your nervous system's sensitivity, but also improves your mood, immunity and sleep.

"Tense the pain" By performing tasks gently by "touching, nudging and teasing" the pain, your brain understands that the pain is due to sensitivity, not injury, and gets used to it. In a while you can do a little more and your tasks and accomplishments will grow.

Set realistic goals for different parts of your life like exercise, work and household chores. Any task can be broken down into smaller parts, so you can handle the smaller parts one after another and gradually build on your success.

4. Immune boosting behaviours:

These are behaviours that you can use to counteract the processes that combine to cause pain. Here is a very general list of things that we know can help to buffer the immune system:
 Managing your quality of life by making sure you maintain social contacts and have a daily routine, control of your treatment options, family and medical support, a strong belief system, a sense of humour and exercising appropriately.

5. Relaxation techniques:

Simple relaxation techniques, like doing deep breathing, mindfulness, prayer / meditation can help to quiet nerves down, promote general well-being and improve sleep.

Find the technique that works best for you.

6. Improving your sleep hygiene

Sleep hygiene is the term used to describe good sleep habits. There are many strategies one can follow before going to bed and during sleeping hours, to help you sleep better. Ask your physiotherapist for a checklist on good sleep hygiene.



MAKE YOUR GOAL(S) SMART:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Realistic
- Time managed

- What will I do? Phone a friend
- How much? In the afternoon
- When? *
- Use a scale of 0-10: Twice a week
- How Often? *

*0 = not confident at all & 10 = totally confident that I will. Your confidence level should be about 7 with the goal you choose for you to realistically achieve it.

7. Social interaction:

People with long-standing pain don't tend to go out a lot, but social interaction can be helpful to decrease pain. Get out of the house and attend activities like dinner with a friend, a movie, family gatherings, go for a walk outside or attend a weekend market. Choose smaller less demanding tasks to start with and progress from there.

8. Use Heat/Cold/TENS:

Both heat and cold may help to relieve pain and inflammation. They should be used in a trial and error test to see which of the two helps the most with your particular problem. Some people find alternating the two helps them the most.

General rule: When a joint is hot and/or swollen -

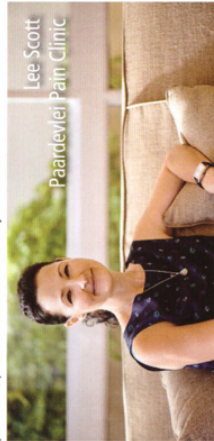
use ice to decrease the heat and swelling. Apply for 10 minutes at a time and repeat every two hours if necessary.

When a joint aches, especially in cold weather, use heat for 20 minutes or longer, as often as necessary. Apply either heat or cold when discomfort arises, or apply both sequentially.

A TENS unit is a low-voltage, battery-operated electrical device which can decrease pain by applying an electric current. It is compact and can be clipped on to a belt or placed in a pocket. Speak to your physiotherapist if you would like to find out more about this method of pain relief.

9. Taking prescribed medication, at timed intervals:

Medication should always be taken as prescribed by your attending physician at the prescribed intervals, to get the best results. Consistently taking your medication and knowing the intended effects of the pill also seems to help with decreasing pain. If you are uncertain about the way you should take your medication, or if you want to decrease the amount of medication you take, please discuss this with your doctor.



- References and further reading:
1. David Butler & Lorimer Moseley - Explain Pain.
 2. Adriaan Louw - Why do I Hurt? Everyone has Back Pain & Therapeutic Neuroscience Education Course.
 3. Phyllis Berger - The Journey to Pain Relief.
 4. Train Pain Exercises for Pain Rehabilitation & Principles of Pain courses.
 5. World Confederation for Physical Therapy Congress 2017 - Central Sensitization in Physical Therapy Practice around the world course.
 6. NHS Eprom and St. Heller University Hospitals Value Based Goal Setting
 7. Paardeveel Pain Program - Managing Setbacks, Pain & Exercise, Sleep Hygiene Patient Handout