

## Living Well with Pain (Resource to accompany blog)

### Understand Pain

There are many good books that can help with understanding pain like Explain pain by David Butler & Lorimer Moseley. There are also good YouTube videos that can be helpful to watch, some of these can be found on the links and resources page of my website. Along with a list of helpful books and websites.

Here is a Facebook post I wrote as part of Pain Awareness Month in September 2019 which could be helpful to read

<https://www.facebook.com/460133870700702/posts/2361500123897391/>

Consider what you think about posture and pain, does posture matter? The evidence tells us it doesn't 'cause' pain and that it does matter, but not for the reasons commonly believed (instead, for example how we relate to our world and for variability of movement). It can be helpful to remember movements and certain positions can become associated with a protection response and with feeling pain.

You can work with a healthcare professional who has specialised in pain or who has current evidenced based understanding of the changes that can happen when pain persists (if you are unsure about this, ask them) to develop an understanding of things like:

- 👉 What happens to the brain & body when pain persists.
- 👉 Why things like our thoughts, beliefs and mindset matter.
- 👉 Why hurt doesn't necessarily equal harm.
- 👉 Why pain & scans don't match (we can't find pain on scans).



## Sleep

Some tips to maximize your opportunity to get enough good quality sleep:

- Have a regular time to go to bed and get up to give yourself enough sleep opportunity (eg if you know you function best on 7 hours sleep give yourself 8 hours in bed).
- Have a wind down routine before bed – for example, journaling, a warm bath, meditation, or gentle stretches.
- Turn off technology 1-2 hours before bed.
- If you drink coffee or caffeinated drinks it may be better to restrict these to before lunch time (some people find they are best without caffeine, others can have a little before lunch and others can drink it in the afternoon without it affecting sleep).
- Let go of the sleep struggle – when you worry about sleep or overthink it (we humans do that a lot!) it makes things worse, know that you are doing the best you can and focus on relaxing knowing that you benefit from this too. There are a number of strategies you can use to drop the sleep struggle using acceptance & commitment therapy.

There are some tips for helping with sleep available online, like here:

<https://www.sleepfoundation.org/articles/healthy-sleep-tips>

## Acceptance

Remember acceptance isn't passive or giving in, instead it's a way to drop the struggle and turn towards what's most important to you with pain in the background rather than the foreground. Some tips that can help:



🕒 Things are always changing in our external and internal worlds, even though it may not feel like it. Even when pain feels like it is always there, it is always changing and there are spaces around it. Everything in our inner and outer worlds is in a constant state of flux (even our cells are constantly renewing). It is often helpful to remember things are not permanent – nothing stays the same.

🕒 We can only accept things as they are right now, acknowledge the pain if it is there, and allow it to sit in the background even though you would rather it wasn't there.

🕒 Remind yourself that you know that you are doing your best.

🕒 You can unhook from unhelpful thoughts, rather than taking action on them or ruminating on them, in various ways, for example you can say 'I notice I am thinking the thought that...' or 'here comes the 'x' story again.' (label the story).

🕒 Practicing mindfulness and meditation can help you notice when you are getting hooked up in your thoughts and emotions and see the choices you have to choose what's most helpful in that moment.

## **Meaningful Activities & Purpose**

Some tips for helping you connect with meaning & purpose:

- Ask yourself what gets you out of bed in the morning? Think more deeply than to go to work or get the children to school (as important as these things are). Consider what's most important to you, what are you connected to, what difference do you want to make, how would you like to be remembered? Notice any connection between these answers and your values.



- What are your values? There are many values lists available, sort the values into most important, a little important and not at all important. Then from most important put some into extremely important, these are most likely your core values.
- How do your values relate to your current goals? How do they relate to what you love to do?
- What activities do you do, or did you do where you were in flow (fully absorbed in what you were doing)? What is it you most enjoy about these activities?
- You can take small steps towards your goals each day by living aligned with your values. What steps can you take in-line with your values in the direction of your goals?
- All of the above will help you in exploring your purpose.

## Language

Our self-talk can motivate us & support us, or pull us down.

- Self-criticism is common (it's part of being human), especially when living with pain, self-compassion can help. The 3 circles model in Compassion Focused Therapy/Compassionate Mind Training can be helpful for us all, the circles are threat, drive and soothing:
  - The threat circle is associated with the fight-flight response (stress response) and protection. The emotions associated with this include: anger, frustration, self-criticism, anxiety and fear.



- The drive circle is associated with incentive, working towards what we want to achieve, striving & competing. Emotions associated with this are excitement and vitality.
  - The soothing circle is associated with rest and digest (relaxation response), feeling grounded and at ease. It is associated with feeling safe, calm, connected, at ease, connected.
  - An exercise you can do is draw the 3 circles the size they are relative to each other and consider what is in each of your circles. For example, is your language stimulating your threat system? What language could you use that's kinder? Is exercise in your threat circle? How could you, for example make it feel safer and bring it into your soothing circle? How can you bring more soothing activities in?
- Notice when you use 'but' after you have said something (it negates what you said), instead try replacing it with something like 'even though.'
  - Notice how many 'should's ' or 'should not's' you use (this is often associated with feeling like you must do something, even if it doesn't feel right to you, and it is often associated with feeling guilty).
  - Be kind to yourself with what you say, be your own friend.
  - Ask yourself what you can do for yourself out of kindness today.

## **Pacing**

Some questions to explore, consider:



- 👉 Do you know your baselines for activity?
- 👉 Do you do what's important to you or do you avoid doing it in fear of it making the pain worse?
- 👉 Do you push on regardless? (boom bust cycle)
- 👉 Do you make adjustments to usual day to day pacing for other factors like lack of sleep?
- 👉 Do you incorporate the helpful strategies/your toolkit into your day
- 👉 Do you have a set-back plan for a flare-up? Do you know how you can adjust it?

Here's a Facebook post I wrote in September 2019 for pain awareness month on pacing  
[https://www.facebook.com/UnityPhysiotherapy/posts/2360828907297846?\\_tn\\_ =K-R](https://www.facebook.com/UnityPhysiotherapy/posts/2360828907297846?_tn_ =K-R)

### **Managing a set-back/flare-up**

It's important to build your own toolkit of the things that look after your health & wellbeing and help you live well with pain. This could include mindfulness, exercise, relaxation, acceptance & commitment based exercises, and more. These can all be part of a what I call a flexible and compassionate set back plan to help calm things down and then build things back up. There is some guidance here in the Unity Physiotherapy & Wellbeing compassionate set-back plan blog <https://www.unityphysio.co.uk/a-compassionate-setback-plan-for-living-with-persistent-pain/>

### **Exercise**

This is important in looking after our health and wellbeing, it may help decrease the pain too (at a helpful level it may decrease pain a little). Consider:

- What you enjoy doing.
- What exercise is meaningful or what physical activities are meaningful to you.
- What benefits of exercise do you most value.



- Incorporate some play.
- The different aspects of exercise – flexibility, balance, cardiovascular and strength.

These two blogs will give you some general guidance. You can use these in conjunction with a healthcare professional, or suitably trained fitness professional.

<https://www.unityphysio.co.uk/exercising-with-persistent-pain/>

[https://medium.com/@thomas\\_jesson/exercising-when-it-hurts-a8b70f7b1ebf?referrer=twitter&fbclid=IwAR3ohbyxL7QSRzfg1jmtHNRnxJW\\_ouHYD8Tm\\_Ql\\_8\\_88EtLBNGIPiS2pcQ](https://medium.com/@thomas_jesson/exercising-when-it-hurts-a8b70f7b1ebf?referrer=twitter&fbclid=IwAR3ohbyxL7QSRzfg1jmtHNRnxJW_ouHYD8Tm_Ql_8_88EtLBNGIPiS2pcQ)

### **Calming things down:**

Remember pain is a protection response and systems are on alert, so it is important to calm things down. Some tips that may be helpful:

- Breathing exercises and meditation can help calm the nervous system down, as can doing activities you enjoy doing. You can explore your soothing system using the 3 circles model from Compassion Focused Therapy (mentioned above).
- There are many breathing exercises you can do, I always start with awareness with people as awareness is a foundation upon which to build. Breath practices could include: abdominal breathing; box breathing (imagine breathing in for 4 along a line, hold along another line for 4, breathe out for 4 along another line and so on to create a square, or find a square to look at as you practice this breathing); and an extended exhale practice like golden thread breath or counting your breath and extending the exhale by the count of two. I would recommend exploring these if



you're happy to, or working with a suitably trained healthcare professional or yoga teacher to explore what's helpful for you.

- Many meditation apps do a free trial, I personally use Calm and Waking Up. There are others such as headspace, buddify and insight timer.

## Compassion

Self-compassion can help change self-criticism and helps support us. Here are some tips:

👉 You can explore compassion with a therapist if needed (for example if you have a lot of anxiety) or through any of the books mentioned in the Living Well with Pain blog accompanying this resource (hopefully if you have this resource sheet it means you have read the blog).

👉 Create a few self-compassion practices that are helpful for you. This could include compassionate letter writing, meditation, and using compassionate imagery. There is guidance in the books mentioned in the blog.

👉 Explore the 3 circles model (as mentioned above) – threat, drive & soothing, focusing on increasing the soothing circle is generally helpful. This is a facebook post I did [https://www.facebook.com/UnityPhysiotherapy/posts/2366963333351070?\\_tn\\_ =K-R](https://www.facebook.com/UnityPhysiotherapy/posts/2366963333351070?_tn_ =K-R)

This is a video I have done on using the three circles model in the context of pain

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=729463837878783&extid=wJdzQ8ZFb7omCoDh>

This is a video by Chris Winson & linked infographic by Dr James Kirby (Chris did 9 videos in this compassion series, it may be helpful to explore the others as well).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=peC-bB4DqXQ>





## **Mindset:**

In addition to the things mentioned you may find using a mantra helpful, or setting an intention for your day, a daily gratitude practice , or journaling could be helpful. If you are unsure a suitably trained therapist can provide individual guidance on this.

This is not an exhaustive list of things that can help, it scratches the surface of the many options for looking after your health & wellbeing and living well with pain.

*\*This resource is intended as general information and is not intended to be individual medical advice\**

