

Coping with Chronic Pain

INTRODUCTION

If you have had a spinal cord injury (SCI), you are likely to feel pain at some stage afterwards. Sometimes the pain may be so severe and persistent that you find it difficult to ignore. People with a SCI feel pain most commonly in the upper and lower back, abdomen, arms and legs. Severe pain that does not go away can become a problem for some people with a SCI.

This booklet is not about finding a cure for your pain, as this is not always possible. Instead, it is about helping to make the pain you experience more manageable, so that you can learn to cope and manage your life more effectively.

ACUTE PAIN

Acute pain usually begins suddenly and is generally a result of disease or physical damage to the body. Acute pain acts as a danger signal, telling you there is something wrong which needs attending to. Once the problem is solved, the pain normally goes away.

CHRONIC PAIN

Chronic pain persists despite treatment, for longer than six months. If pain persists despite therapy, it ceases to serve a useful purpose. The reason for such ongoing pain is not always clear and it is often difficult to identify a precise cause.

Unfortunately not all pain can be cured, and some people are left with ongoing or frequent pain episodes. While painkillers can be effective, they do not always help and some people do not like to take pills over a long period. Those who suffer pain are aware that, if severe, it can interfere with your daily routine and reduce your quality of life generally.

MAKING PAIN BETTER AND WORSE

Sometimes it is possible to notice things that seem to make your pain better and worse. For example, things that might make the pain worse include smoking, being tired, changes in weather, being emotionally upset or having bladder, bowel or skin problems. Keeping busy and absorbed in an activity, or being rested and relaxed, have been found to make pain better.

Alternatively, there might not be any obvious pattern to the ups and downs of your pain. If you are able, it might be helpful to keep a record of your pain over time, together with a note of the time of day and what you were doing when experiencing pain, as this sometimes reveals a pattern that you never noticed before.

Some studies have indicated that anger, anxiety and emotional distress are associated with more severe pain, while people who are more accepting of their pain report lower levels of pain. Depression can also accompany and make the pain worse.

If these are problems for you, they might need to be addressed first, perhaps through professional counselling, to control anger, anxiety and negative feelings. Once these other problems have been tackled, you may find your pain is less of a problem.

WHAT CAUSES PAIN?

Researchers believe that chronic pain following SCI is caused by problems inside the central nervous system. This explains why the pain goes on even after peripheral sources of acute pain have healed.

Your pain might be due to broken bones or sore joints and muscles resulting from your injury. Also, if you are unable to use your muscles and joints for a while, they may be painful once you start to move them once more.

WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT IT?

Physical treatments include medication, electrical stimulation (TENS) and neurosurgical procedures. These are sometimes effective, but none are completely successful in all cases. These procedures are also basically passive: you allow professional staff to do something to you to reduce your pain.

This booklet focuses on psychological approaches to pain management, which can be used as well as, or instead of, physical therapy. Unlike physical methods, psychological approaches depend on you being an *active participant* in the pain management, and the greatest advantage of this is enabling you to feel in *control* of your body.

TECHNIQUES YOU CAN USE TO CONTROL YOUR PAIN

Relaxation training

There is good scientific evidence that relaxation is effective in managing pain, through decreasing the physical tension in the body, focusing attention away from the pain, reducing levels of anxiety and helping sleep. Like other worthwhile techniques, relaxation is a skill that gets better with practice, so it is important to make time to carry out the procedure regularly. With time, relaxation helps you feel in control as you can learn to reduce your pain through reducing the physical tension in your body. Your therapist can help you learn specific relaxation techniques, which include autohypnotic relaxation training, muscular relaxation and deep breathing exercises.

Pacing your activities

Pacing yourself is about doing things throughout the day for periods of time that do not increase your pain. If you force yourself for a day or even more, you can end up with much worse pain and be unable to do much at all for the next few days. You may also end up taking more medication and becoming more irritable. On the other hand, if you pace yourself and listen to your body, you can be active every day. This might mean taking a break even before you need it. By trial and error you can work out what you can do and for how long without your pain returning or getting worse.

For example, you may find you can work for 30 minutes at a time through the day, with 10 minute breaks in between, and still feel active the next day. However, if you push yourself to work for several hours at a time, you might accomplish more that day, but then be out of action and with increased pain for several subsequent days.

Positive self-statements

People who think positively about managing their pain often cope with it much better than those who have a negative attitude. If possible, try keeping a record of the kind of thoughts that go through your mind concerning your pain. Some typical statements that demonstrate the difference between positive and negative thinking about pain are:

Positive: "I am coping well, under the circumstances".

"I know I can manage if I keep going at a steady pace".

Negative: "Why me? It's not fair. I've always taken good care of my health".

"What's the point? Exercise doesn't seem to get rid of the pain".

Your therapist can help you learn to identify and replace negative ways of thinking about your pain with more helpful positive statements. These take into account your strengths and personal resources, based on evidence of your past experience, and this enables you to develop the belief in your ability and skills to cope with the pain. The therapist will also encourage you to use calming self-statements and positive self-talk techniques that become easier and more effective with practice.

Hobbies/interests: pleasant activity scheduling

If you are bored and have nothing to look forward to in the morning you will become more focused on your pain and will feel increasingly low altogether. Unnecessarily limiting yourself by doing less and less because of the pain will only make things worse: you could end up feeling lonely and isolated, especially if you stop going out and meeting friends. This can result in a downwards spiral of having nothing to do, daily life becoming increasingly restricted and progressively focusing more on pain.

To decrease your concern over your pain, consult your doctor to find out what you can and cannot do. Then you can start to plan activities that are feasible. Try to structure your time so that you have something enjoyable to do every day, perhaps a new activity or one that you gave up after your injury. This will help improve your mood and focus your attention from the pain you are experiencing.

Talking less about your pain

The more you talk and think about pain, the more you become aware of it. Your family or friends may frequently ask you about your pain, from a natural concern for you, and sometimes also to reassure you that they care. This can result in over-protectiveness, which prevents you from being independent, with others doing things for you that you could do for yourself. You then lose confidence in your ability to do these things.

Furthermore, talking about pain frequently means you can come to be seen as a "person in pain" rather than as a person with a range of interests, feelings and directions in life. Gently explain to your family and friends that you do not wish to be asked about your pain frequently.

Distraction

Keeping your mind occupied on matters other than your pain can be helpful. As we have already discussed, if you are bored or lack any kind of structure to your day, you will tend to focus more on the pain, and this can make it worse. When you are in pain, it is hard to stop thinking about how this feels, and this too can make it worse. Distraction techniques can focus your attention away from the pain: you cannot concentrate fully on two things at once.

Ways of distracting yourself can include:

- i. **Refocusing your attention to your environment:** eg describe to yourself all the sounds you can hear: what are the sounds, how far away, how loud, how long they last etc. Or choose an object that you can see and describe it in great detail: its size, colour, position, function etc. Or you could count all the red objects in the room, or flowers in the garden.
- ii. **Mental activity:** this might be counting backwards in 7s from 100, saying the alphabet backwards, doing a crossword or reciting a poem out loud.
- iii. **Pleasant imagery/visualisation:** you could try imagining a peaceful scene, one that you particularly like or remember, such as the sea, countryside or a beautiful animal. As well as the visual images, you could think about the smells, noises and sounds from the scene that make you feel calm. Focusing on pleasant memories distracts attention away from pain, as well as helping you to relax.

However, these are not appropriate substitutes for dealing with any particular problems you may be worried about and which might be causing stress, thus making the pain worse.

CONCLUSION

This booklet illustrates that while it may not always be possible to cure persistent pain, there are many effective techniques that make pain easier to manage. These strategies are about learning to think in a helpful and positive way about pain management, and adopting behaviours that have helped many people tolerate pain more effectively. The main ones are:

- ◆ keeping stimulated and occupied while listening to your body to prevent "over-doing it";
- ◆ distracting yourself from your pain and focusing your attention elsewhere;
- ◆ relaxing.

All these techniques take time and practice to perfect. Use trial and error to determine which are the most effective ways for you, and share your ideas with friends and family - they will find it easier to support you if they know what you are aiming for, and they may have some good ideas to contribute.

Perhaps one of the greatest benefits of developing an active approach to your difficulties, as described here, is in enabling you to take control of your pain, rather than the other way round.

July 1998 (V2 July 03)