



Module 4 - Management Of Pain

Education

Educating people so they understand why they have pain can lead to:

- Improvement in physical capacity
- Less anticipation of pain
- Reduced muscle tension levels
- Reduce fear and anxiety of pain
- Increased confidence that recovery is possible

As you learned, these changes can be seen on specialised brain scans called functional MRI.

The type of education that leads to these improvements is learning about how the nervous system and brain creates and maintains pain, and how fears and anxieties can actually make pain worse.

Some of these concepts are quite complex and difficult to understand initially. The better you understand what is happening in your body, the more confident you will be in participating in rehabilitation.

Once you understand these processes, you can begin to manage your pain more successfully.



Example: Appointment With A Specialist

If you have ever seen a specialist about your pain, or even for any other medical condition, I'm sure you want some information and advice from them.

Hopefully, a specialist will talk to you and explain what is going on so you understand it. Sometimes they may not be able to give you any specific treatment to fix it. But even if they explain it well, most of the time you will understand what is going on which can make you feel better and less anxious.

If you have ever been unhappy with a specialist, often it is because they don't talk and explain the problem to you.

If a specialist, or any health professional talks and explains your problem well, your new knowledge about your condition can reduce your anxiety and help you move forward.

Hurt Does Not Equal Harm

You have learned that the amount of pain is not directly related to the severity of the injury. Remember the soldier or footballer who keeps going even with a bad injury. Also think about the paper cut that for some reason seems really painful.

You should be able to understand why hurt doesn't equal harm. Because....

- Your nervous system has become more sensitive
- Stress hormones can make your pain worse
- Your rest and digest system isn't working
- More area of your brain becomes involved in producing pain

Physical Rehabilitation

Part of the chronic pain cycle results in weakness and stiffness not only to your injury, but also to the rest of your body. This is because you have reduced your normal activity level.

Rehabilitation involves reversing this process and resuming exercise and activity both to strengthen your injury and to get your body back into shape. The difficult part now is that because your nervous system is over sensitive and your brain is too protective, you get pain with low levels of exercise. This makes it difficult to exercise. This is when you have to remember that hurt does not equal harm.

We use a process called pacing and graded exposure to overcome this sensitivity to movement and exercise. It is a safe method to start exercising so you will not cause any harm to your injury.

Pacing and graded exposure simply means slowly building up your movement, activity and exercise tolerance. Beginning your exercise and activity level and building it up slowly allows your sensitive nervous system to build up its tolerance to movement.

Desensitising these nervous system changes involves gradually exposing your injured tissues, along with the rest of your body to more and more movement over time. As your body gradually increases activity, the nerves will gradually become accustomed to the movement and the sensitivity will reduce. Also as

you understand that the movement is not harmful, the fear and anxiety associated with the movement will reduce.

Beginning Your Exercise Program

When you begin pacing and graded exposure, you need to find the amount of movement and activity that your body can currently manage. This amount of activity is different for every person. We call this the baseline.

The baseline is the amount of movement that you can cope with comfortably, without causing your symptoms to flare up.

The next step is setting goals...

Short term goals

A short term goal is something that you think you will achieve in a short time, say 1 or 2 weeks. Achieving a short term goal will be a progression towards achieving the long term goal.

Examples of short term goals may be (for someone with a back injury)

- to be able to sit for 30 minutes
- to walk for 5 minutes
- to do the 10 abdominal exercises the physio showed me properly

Long term goals

A long term goal is what you finally want to achieve once you have recovered from your injury. It is usually an interest/hobby or a work function that you have not been able to do because of your injury.

Examples of long term goals may be

- To ride a bike for 30 minutes
- To go out for dinner and sit without pain
- To be able to vacuum the house

Once you have a baseline and goals to work towards, the challenge is how to go from your baseline level of activity up to your goal. The principles of pacing are:-

- Slow gradual increases in activity
- Increased time exercising. For example start walking 5 minutes, then 7 minutes etc
- Increased number of repetitions of an exercise
- Using a heavier weight
- Changing the location of your exercise

For example, starting at the physio's clinic, progressing to exercising at home, progressing further to a gym, and finally to exercising after coming home from work.

Have a structured plan for how you will pace your exercise and activity program. Stick to this plan even if sometimes you experience pain doing the exercise. Remember that your nerves are sensitised and are trying to overprotect you. Some soreness does not mean harm.

Reward yourself when you achieve your short term goals, and use this achievement as a reminder that you will achieve your long term goal.

Keep an exercise diary. This can help you to remember how far you have progressed towards your goal.

Flare Ups

Have a system to manage flare ups. Every now and then, you will progress too fast and your nerves will send heaps of information to your brain, resulting in pain. When this happens:-

- Don't panic - remember your sensitised, overprotective system and hurt does not equal harm
- Rethink the progression you made that caused the flare up - was it too much too soon?
- Do the same activity but a slightly slower progression
- Keep the harder progression but omit one of your easier tasks/exercises, so you may be doing less overall activity but more intense activity.
- Use cognitive strategies to cope with the pain
- Stay positive
- Challenge your thoughts and beliefs about the cause of the pain
- Breathing and relaxation exercises

Continuing Your Exercises Yourself

Now you need to manage your exercises on your own. The longer you continue with the program, the more you will improve.

Remember the pacing principles that we discussed in module 4.

The aim is to continue to gradually upgrade your exercise program within your body's physical limitations and without causing a flare up. Nudging the pain is OK and can help to desensitise the nervous system that has been overprotective of you.

Continue with the exercises that you have been doing in the last week of the rehabilitation program. Think about the ways that you can upgrade the exercises such as:-

- Increasing the repetitions
- Increasing the weight you lift
- Increasing the total time you exercise for