

Pacing and Setting Baselines

We know that everyone is unique. We have different values, responsibilities, hopes and expectations for our lives. Living with chronic pain will impact on how we cope on a daily basis.

Some people tend to reduce their activities and take more rest. This may be due to anxiety, or fear that pain associated with activity is causing harm. This will lead us to become deconditioned and to become stiffer, weaker and less fit.

Others may push through the pain in order to get done what needs to be done.

Many of us push ourselves in the following ways:

- By getting things over and done with quickly
- Continuing until our symptoms make us stop
- By doing things to please other people
- Or because we've always done it

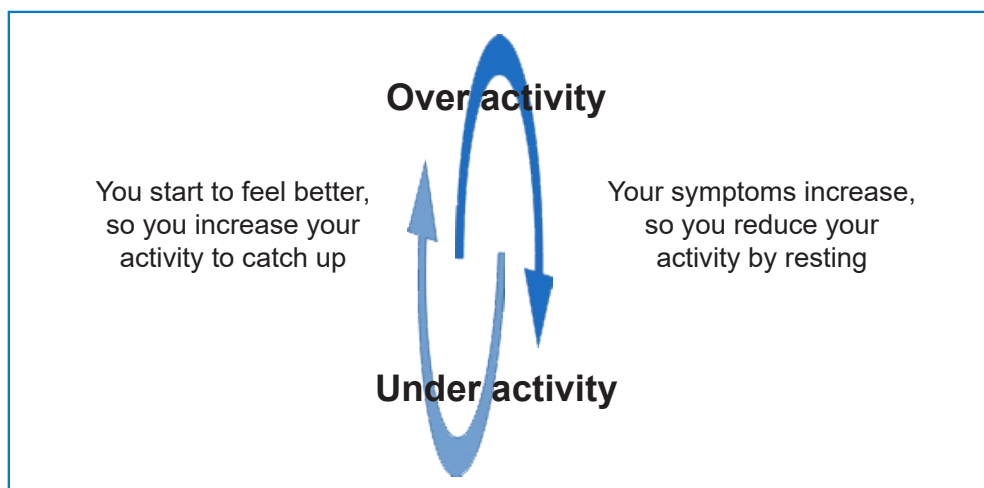
On 'good' days when we feel better, it is tempting to do the things we weren't able to do on those days when we felt too tired or unwell. It is easy to overdo things and can lead to us feeling worse on the following days and feeling the need to take more rest.

When we allow this to happen we don't just feel more pain, but other emotions too, such as frustration, anger, guilt or disappointment. We may feel we have 'lost' or 'failed'. Pain isn't just a physical experience; it affects our emotions too.

It might go something like this:

We overdo it, so our symptoms get worse. We rest and our symptoms improve. Then we do more to catch up, so our symptoms get worse again, and so on ...

Does this sound familiar?



This can feel like a trap of 'over-activity' followed by 'under-activity'. It is called a 'boom and bust' approach, and may become a vicious cycle if we don't take action to stop it.

If we don't stop this cycle we might link being active and doing things with feeling unwell and then reduce our activities or even avoid some of them altogether. Even enjoyable activities like going on holiday or to family parties can become 'no-go areas'.

It is important for us to recognise when to stop physical activity before it has an impact on how we feel, and to strike a balance between activity and rest. We can do this by using skills such as pacing and setting baselines.

What is pacing?

Pacing can mean different things such as:

- Spreading activities throughout the day or week you start to feel better, so you increase your activity to catch up. Your symptoms increase, so you reduce your activity by resting
- Doing some activities more slowly
- Finding new ways of doing tasks

Pacing can play an important part in managing your condition and can allow you to keep the balance and stay in control.

Successful Pacing

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Break tasks into chunks• Slow down• Prioritise• Plan | <p><i>(you don't have to do it all at once)</i></p> <p><i>(you don't have to do it quickly)</i></p> <p><i>(what really needs to be done)</i></p> <p><i>(what you need to do and how to do it)</i></p> |
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What are baselines?

Some people describe a baseline as 'taking a break before I need it'. It is a level or period of activity, which can be carried out on both good and bad days. We can use this as a starting point, and as we become fitter and more used to activity we may find that the baseline will gradually increase, enabling us to work harder or for longer.

Everyone is different and so is everybody's baseline. Only we can decide where our own baseline is set.

One way to do this is to keep a record or a diary. Here we can record the type of activity, and how long we can do it, before it starts to impact on our pain or emotions and forces us to stop. Baselines can be set for many everyday activities, such as housework, gardening, preparing a meal or shopping.

Example:

Mary likes walking. On a good day she can manage to walk for 15 minutes. On a bad day she can walk for 5 minutes. She makes a decision to set a baseline of 7 minutes – less than a good day, but slightly more than a bad day. She can see how she gets on with this.

She may decide to reduce the baseline to 5 minutes or increase it to 8 or 9 minutes, depending on how she feels. Whatever level she decides upon, she will continue with this on a good day also.

Think of an activity you often do that you sometimes have to stop before you want to because of pain.

Work out the longest time you can do it before you have to stop – How much on a ‘good’ day?

Work out the shortest time you can do it before you have to stop – How much on a ‘bad’ day?

Set a baseline. A realistic amount of time you could do that activity for now without significantly increasing your pain

Once you have worked out a baseline you can start by increasing it gradually, perhaps by 1 minute from time to time and repeat the activity 2 or 3 times over the week.

Some people have found that using a stopwatch or a kitchen timer can be a useful reminder of when the time is up. Others find it useful to record their progress.

Setting a baseline may help us to tackle activities that we have been particularly avoiding, such as gardening or sewing. Having a baseline to work with, allows us to make a start. We can use it for many of our everyday activities.

We can see how learning the skills of pacing and setting baselines may help us to manage our pain levels whilst keeping active. They may be particularly useful at different periods in our lives such as during a flare-up of our condition, after we’ve been ill or when faced with new or difficult situations.

They are important self-management tools that allow us to carry on with things that are important and take on new challenges. With practice we can feel more in control and maintain our balance.

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Physiotherapy Department
Huddersfield Royal Infirmary

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MSK physiotherapy Admin Office

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