

# How do I cope with PERSISTENT PAIN



It can be hard to know why you might be feeling in pain, what is causing this and what can help. You may be experiencing lots of different feelings and emotions about your pain and be wondering who you can talk to about this and what can help.



This toolkit will tell you more about what persistent pain is, and give you lots of ideas and strategies to help you cope.

# GENERAL PRINCIPLES

## What is persistent pain?

Persistent pain is pain that continues for longer than three months and is **not** normally associated with damaged tissues. An increased feeling of pain is thought to be due to nerves sending persistent 'faulty' messages about pain to the brain.

**These messages are not a signal that the body is damaged or not healed.** Persistent pain can, at times, be difficult to understand and is sometimes challenging to treat.

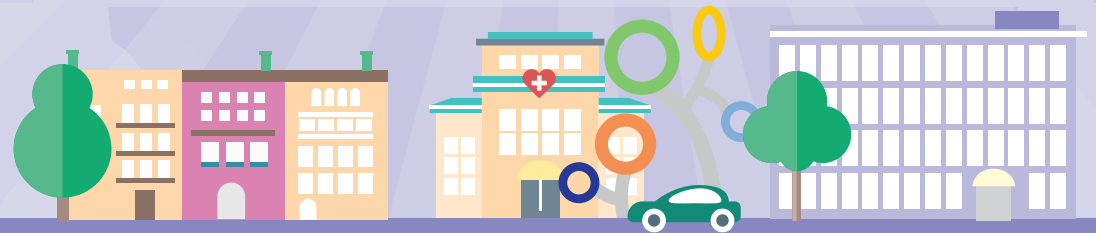
## The impact of persistent pain

Persistent pain can be difficult to cope with and can lead to you feeling tense or worried, which can affect how much pain you feel. It can also be hard to accept that there might not be a cure for your pain and you may not be able to do all the things you do in the same way. However, whilst it may not be possible to get rid of your pain, it is possible to manage your pain.

## What can I do to help?

Developing strategies to manage your pain can help you feel better. It can be useful to think of managing persistent pain as being like using a toolbox. Inside this toolbox there are strategies which can help on their own. However, when chosen carefully and used together, they can help better in the longer term.

The following are some of the strategies which can help you live well alongside your pain. It is important to be patient with yourself, as it may take you a few weeks or months to see changes or improvements.



# Top tips and strategies

**1** **Setting goals** Setting targets for each day, and for the longer term, can help keep the body and mind active. This also helps give direction to your recovery. As with any recovery, it is important to choose goals that matter to you – for example, being able to do the shopping or driving the car. In time, these goals can become more challenging, but you have to break them down into small and manageable steps.

**2** **Pacing** Carrying on physical activity to the point of unmanageable pain or exhaustion is rarely helpful. It is tempting to try and finish things or 'push through the pain', but this usually makes pain or tiredness worse and is discouraging. Taking regular breaks in activities, changing position, resting briefly between activities or doing stretches throughout the day can all help. Regularly setting goals and using pacing techniques can together help you to achieve many of the activities that persistent pain may initially have 'stolen' from you.

**3** **Relaxation** Practising relaxation techniques regularly can help to reduce persistent pain. It is a useful skill to have, and takes time to develop. Learning to relax can help you sleep, get good-quality rest and cope well with stressful and difficult situations. There are many types of relaxation

technique and it is important to know that these are different from, for example, reading a book quietly or watching TV. There may be classes available locally that can help teach relaxation, or these may be available at your pain clinic. There are also many books, CDs or videos on relaxation techniques.

**4** **Helpful breathing** Stress and pain can lead us to breathe in an unhelpful way, taking short shallow breaths from our chest. This type of breathing can cause symptoms such as tension, dizziness, racing heart, difficulties concentrating, chest tightness and pins and needles.

A helpful way to breathe is from the tummy, not the chest. When you breathe in, your tummy should move out a little, when you breathe out, your tummy should fall in slightly. Your upper chest should stay still at all times. Relaxed, slow breathing from the tummy helps you stay calm and relaxed. A lot of people with pain have said that learning to breathe like this was one of the most important things they learned.

**5** **Keeping physically active** Research shows that people with persistent pain who keep active tend to feel better and can do more. To do this usually involves improving general fitness. When in persistent pain, movements or activities that can make pain worse do not necessarily

# Top tips and strategies

involve further damage or injury. It is very important to understand this, as it means that being active may hurt but this does not mean you are getting injured or harmed. Understanding this can help you recover and get back some of the life you may have lost to persistent pain. Physical activity can increase the level of endorphins (natural pain killers) in our body, reducing pain the natural way.

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## Socialising

Having contact with people can play an enormous part in helping you feel better. Pain can make it hard to get out to see people or to join in with what they are doing, but social contact can be at home, over a cup of tea, within whatever limits you have. It has been shown that keeping in touch with friends and family is good for our overall health.

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## Enjoyment

Sometimes you may concentrate on what you must do, and forget the enjoyable activities. Try to find the time to phone a friend or go out to the cinema, even if you have to leave halfway through. Be pleased with the things that you have accomplished. Try to include at least one enjoyable activity in your list of things to do every day. Fun and pleasure stimulate Serotonin (known as the happiness hormone) in our body. Raising Serotonin levels can reduce pain, improve sleep and our mood.

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## Be kinder to yourself

Often, the things we tell ourselves can make it difficult to live with persistent pain, and can impact on how we feel and what we do. For example, thoughts like "I'm useless now I can't do ..." will contribute to low mood and reduced activity. Noticing and modifying unhelpful thoughts, for example by asking yourself "What would I say to a friend in this situation?" can make it easier to live with persistent pain.

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## Distract yourself

Shift your attention onto something else so the pain isn't the only thing on your mind. Get stuck into an activity that you enjoy or find stimulating. Many hobbies, like photography, sewing or knitting, are possible even when your mobility is restricted.

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## Medicines

Medicines are often used for persistent pain and may give valuable relief. They are just one of the many tools in our 'toolbox' and you should use them alongside all of the other tools. The aim should be to use the minimum amount of medicines needed to allow you to increase your general activity and exercise.

It takes time and a great deal of effort to learn these self-help strategies – but they can often help considerably in making life more manageable. It is difficult to do this on your own. You may need help from a pain clinic or a book about managing pain, or you may need to go on a pain-management programme.

# WHAT SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE?

For further support you can ask your GP to refer you to the Pain Clinic, based at:

Central Health Clinic,  
Tower Hill,  
BS2 0JD

Telephone: **0117 342 7575**

## Links to appropriate resources

1. [www.paintoolkit.org](http://www.paintoolkit.org): This Pain Toolkit website provides handy tips and skills to support people along the way to managing their pain.
2. [www.britishpainsociety.org.uk](http://www.britishpainsociety.org.uk): This website has information leaflets that you can download, as well as a list of addresses and links to other websites.
3. [www.painconcern.org.uk](http://www.painconcern.org.uk): Pain Concern provides information and support for pain sufferers, those who care for them and about them, free factsheets and leaflets to help you manage your pain.
4. [www.action-on-pain.co.uk](http://www.action-on-pain.co.uk): Action on Pain is a growing national charity that provides practical help and support to people living with or affected by chronic pain. The charity is run by a team of people who have direct experience of living and dealing with long-term pain conditions. It is recognised today as the UK's leading pain charity both in terms of the support it gives to individuals plus the campaigning/lobbying that is undertaken to raise the profile of pain.
5. **"Living with Chronic Pain"** - Neil Berry's CD can be downloaded (free) or listened to on line at [www.paincd.org.uk](http://www.paincd.org.uk). It includes information about strategies to help manage pain plus a guided relaxation exercise.



These toolkits have been written by NHS clinical psychologists and neuropsychologists working for University Hospitals Bristol. They have been co-designed with service users and healthcare staff. These toolkits are only intended to provide general advice and information. Please discuss your individual needs with your doctor or specialist nurse. If you would like more information about psychology services please go to:

<http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/support-for-patients/psychological-health-services/>

We would like to thank patients and other healthcare staff for their contributions to this toolkit.

For access to other patient toolkits please go to the following address:

<http://www.uhbristol.nhs.uk/patients-and-visitors/support-for-patients/psychological-health-services/resources/>

For this leaflet in large print, audio or PDF format, please email [patientleaflets@uhbristol.nhs.uk](mailto:patientleaflets@uhbristol.nhs.uk)

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