
Information from your Patient Aligned Care Team

Chronic Pain Self-Management

If you have chronic pain, difficult days are inevitable. Coping strategies range from meditation to watching a funny movie.

One of the hardest things to accept may be that there is no cure for your pain. While there are lifestyle changes and medications that can lessen the severity of your pain or fatigue, you will continue to have good days and bad days.

Coping strategies for getting through a bad day can range from taking frequent rest breaks throughout the day to watching a funny movie or talking with a favorite friend on the phone. Preparing a list of these strategies in advance can help lessen the impact of pain.

Why prepare a list in advance?

When pain or fatigue is severe, you might not be thinking clearly. A flare of pain symptoms can send you into a spiral of stress and despair if you aren't prepared. But having a plan to follow gives you a sense of control over your signs and symptoms.

Write down your options for coping and keep your list where you can find it when you feel a bad day coming. Different strategies work better for some people than for others. Some may work fine for you on one day but not on another. That's why it's good to have a variety of options to choose from.

Avoid negative self-talk

Studies have shown that what we say to ourselves inside our heads can affect our perception of pain. Turning negative thoughts into positive ones takes practice but is worth the effort.

Negative	Positive
I can't do anything because of my symptoms.	I can do many things. I just need to pace myself and take breaks.
I have no control over my happiness. The pain controls me.	I can control my happiness. I can be happy and enjoy life despite pain.
People at work are upset with me. They don't think I'm doing my share.	I will do the best job I can. If people don't understand, that's their problem. I can't please everyone.

Tell someone when you're having a difficult day

You might be tempted to keep it to yourself, but resist that urge. While some alone time is a good way to relax, isolating yourself for days can end up making you feel lonely. Tell an understanding friend or family member that you're feeling frustrated or overwhelmed. But don't dwell on your signs and symptoms.

In-person or online support groups can link you to people who are also dealing with pain. In addition to the comfort of talking with people who are facing the same types of challenges, members often share coping techniques that might work for you, too.

Spend your energy 'pennies' wisely

Sometimes it helps to think of the amount of energy you have as pennies in a piggy bank. You need to prioritize tasks so that you won't run out of pennies before the day is done. Pace yourself and take frequent breaks to rest. This mindset is crucial on days when your symptoms flare.

Take a look at what's coming up on your calendar. Identify what's necessary and what's not. Focus your energy in the next few days on what's necessary. Prioritizing your tasks can help reduce your stress levels. People who are overly stressed often have tense muscles, which tend to amplify pain.

Ask for help when you need it

Make a list of people who can help you on bad days. For instance, a family member may be willing to fix meals or run errands for a day. You may be reluctant to be a burden, but your friends and family love you and want to help.

Other resources in your community may be available to help you complete necessary tasks when you're having a really difficult day. Temporary changes that might help you get through a tough day might include shopping at a local grocery store that delivers. Using public transportation or a taxi may be an easier, less stressful way of getting where you need to go. Or you may be able to recruit neighborhood kids to help with yardwork.

Find distractions

Identify activities that distract you from your symptoms. Examples include:

- Funny movies
- Quick-read books
- Outings with friends
- Favorite museums
- Beautiful walking paths

Relax

Set aside time for relaxation on your daily schedule. Add more relaxation time on days when your symptoms flare. Relaxation techniques include:

- **Deep-breathing exercises.** Breathe in slowly and deeply through your nose to a count of five. Hold the air in your lungs for a count of five and then breathe out slowly through your mouth to a count of 10.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation.** Tighten and then relax body parts one at a time, starting at either your head or your feet.
- **Meditation.** Focusing on a single object or repeating a particular sound can help quiet your mind and relax your muscles.
- **Visualization.** Take an imaginary trip to a beautiful place. Use all your senses to experience the location as fully as possible. Feel the sun's warmth. Hear the birds.

Practice makes perfect

The more often you use coping strategies, the easier it becomes. Different strategies work for different people. Something that's worked in the past may not work today, so be flexible and try the next thing on your list.

If you have chronic, difficult days are inevitable. But planning ahead can help you take control of the bad days so that the pain doesn't take control of you.

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