

Activity Pacing: Getting Back To The Things That Matter!

People who live with persistent pain often report how it affects every-day activity, including doing the things that really matter to them. People may manage this in a few different ways.

For example, some people may get into a cycle of “boom-busting” where a person may be “over-active” on the better day (“boom”) only to experience a set-back for the hours or days that follow (“bust”). With time, some will notice that they become less active and perhaps need more time to recover from these episodes (see diagram below).



There are many reasons why people do this. For example habit, a need to get the job done, a desire to not “give in”, or maybe due to expectations set by others and themselves.



What is activity pacing?

“Activity Pacing” is another way to carry out an activity. Pacing in its simplest form is actually doing an activity in shorter “chunks”, and doing something different or even stopping before the pain “flares up”.

A “flare-up” is an increase in pain that prevents you from doing any planned activity. It can last for hours or even days.

How to pace activity?

Pacing might involve breaking up activity (such as house work or gardening) into smaller chunks.

It may also involve prioritising and planning your activity too. For example, writing down a list of what needs to be done according to what's important, what gives you a sense of achievement and what you enjoy. A **"Must"**, **"Should"**, **"Could"** list.

Remember, it's also important to set time aside for periods of rest and relaxation too.

Activity pacing can also be a useful tool to slowly building up your tolerance to do more activity and / or exercise. To make a start with this, you need to work out your baseline.

How to find your baseline.

A baseline is the amount of activity that can be done without flaring up your pain.

Try to think of activities that cause your symptoms to worsen, (e.g. standing, walking, exercising, etc.) and consider how long you can perform each activity for without increasing you pain.

Finding a baseline can often be difficult as pain is not always predictable and can change from day-to-day. Therefore, to work out your baseline you may need to time yourself on both a good day and a bad day.

For example, if someone wanted to look at their sitting baseline, they may work out that they can sit for one hour on a good day and only 10 minutes on a bad day before getting a flare-up. Therefore, in this example, a possible starting baseline may be 10 minutes.

To start pacing, this person would then sit for 10 minutes before changing position or even standing up from the chair, regardless of whether they are having a good or a bad day. What they do at 10 minutes and for how much time might take a bit of trial and error.

Pacing up:

Once you've set your baseline, after a period of time you can begin to build on this slowly. A useful rule of thumb is to increase by 10-20%. So in the example above, the next step might be to increase sitting time to 12 minutes.

Why do this?

Whilst recognising the challenges and frustrations with starting to pace, the overall benefits of pacing can mean that:

1. You can lessen the ups and downs of the boom-bust cycle.
2. It may offer a sense of control as you are choosing how much to do, as opposed to the pain.
3. Over time, it may allow you to be able to do more activity.

Pacing is a choice....

There will of course be times when activities are worth the flare-up that comes after. This is where planning a rest day for after the event might be a good idea.

Pacing is providing you with another choice to allow you to work towards the things that matter to you.

