

# Chronic Pain Guide



**Goal:** Live more fully and enjoyably despite chronic pain.

**How:** Using behavioral and cognitive strategies related to everyday actions to manage one's attention and perspective on pain.

**Steps:** Check off each technique below as you incorporate it into your relationship with pain.

**Behavioral Strategies:** tailoring daily actions to minimize pain.

- Pacing:** Scheduling your day so that you will still have some mental and physical energy left for managing pain.
  - You might space out activities, like grocery shopping or visiting with friends, so that you don't have to push through and push past that edge to where more intense pain lies on the other side.
- Well-balanced nutritious meals:** these can stabilize blood sugar levels, reduce muscle tension, and boost mood.
  - It's common to not eat enough, whether due to nausea related to pain or medication, or simply the pain itself. This poses multiple problems, such as blood sugar fluctuations and low energy because you're not taking enough energy in.
- Mood boosting behaviors:** these can help dispel some funk.
  - Listening to music, sitting or walking in fresh air, or making the smallest of smiles can shift one's perspective into a more positive space.

**Cognitive Strategies:** harnessing the power of our minds to create psychological distance from pain, as well as non-reactivity.

- Mindfulness:** Think of approaching pain as you would approaching a bee.
  - *Option #1:* freak out. Arms fly up, legs get moving, and all efforts of avoiding the bee are made. Sometimes the effort to get away from the bee results in injury by hitting one's head against a nearby object, causing more pain.
  - *Option #2:* Remain attentive to the bee, it's direction of travel, the folds in your clothing, and the winds around you, even if the bee lands on you. By doing so, you can gently shift the bee from your clothes, or simply wait a few moments

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before it flies off on its own. A pain-free and relatively low stress way of handling the bee.

- Mindfulness is closer to this second approach. As pain approaches, opt out of a snap judgement that says, "Oh no! This is bad. I can't handle this. It's going to get so much worse," as the consequence of this is your body tensing and the outcome being a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead, you can opt to put some buffer between you and that judgment by describing the sensations that compose the pain.
  - You might not even label it pain and instead see it as a constellation of varying heat intensities, colors, sounds, and light.
  - This may sound a bit woo-woo, but in fact our mind can get creative and dispell unnecessary suffering.
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- **Distraction:** Distraction from pain through intense focus on other sensations, objects, or activities, can shift your experience as well.
  - You might do this through breathing exercises which pull your focus to the sensation of cool air passing in through your nostrils.
  - You can also become engrossed in a hands-on task like drawing or get lost in a book. I'm sure you can think of a couple more activities that might fit your preferences.
- **Re-establish control:** Pain can also do a number on our sense of control, especially unprovoked pain that comes on without a known cause. For this, reclaiming a sense of control over one's life can be helpful.
  - Calling to mind even the smallest means of control can feel empowering.
  - List the things that you choose in your life, such as what you wear, what you choose to eat, when you choose to get out of bed, choosing to brush your teeth, choosing to call a friend, or to open a door or a window to let some light and fresh air in. Those are all choices, large or small.

Using these techniques, you change your relationship with pain. I hope you find peace through using some or all of them.