

# Coping With Flare-ups

You've been feeling good lately. For the last little while, you've been able to manage at work reasonably well and you can do a bit more at home too. You've even started to feel that maybe you're on top of this RSI thing and you might recover. And then, with no warning, the pain hits you again! It's depressing and frightening. You think "Am I right back where I began? What am I going to do?"

You are not alone. Everyone with a chronic pain condition has flare-ups. They do happen, and they're hard to cope with. However, they are manageable! To help you cope, we've got together some ideas from our members.

The first thing is to work out whether it's an aggravation or a flare-up. Answering "yes" to the following questions might indicate an aggravation:

1. Do you have symptoms in a new area?
2. Do you have new symptoms?
3. Are your symptoms out of control?

If it **is** an aggravation, then you will need to visit your doctor and work out what is going on. You may need to really pull back on activities in order to give your body a chance to recover. Your doctor might be able to suggest a new therapeutic approach for an aggravation. Deciding that it's a flare-up can be pretty discouraging too. You may start to feel anxious and panicky because life has suddenly become unpredictable again.

However, there are things you can do. The first is to work out what caused the flare-up:

- Have you been doing more than you should? – taking a “crash through or crash” approach
- Have you been more stressed than usual
- Have people been pushing you do too much?
- Have you been too conscientious or too hard yourself?
- Is there a new tool or activity in your life, or have you been doing something in a different way?

## In The Laundry

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A useful way to narrow down the cause of your flare-up can be to keep a pain diary. It's a useful tool that both you and your doctor can use to monitor your condition. This doesn't have to be anything fancy; you could even use a voice memo function on your phone to record the details such as – the date, time/duration, location, severity, treatment (and results) and impact of your symptoms. If you'd like to try using a pain diary, you can find some good ones by Googling 'pain diary'.

Of course, it may just not be possible to work out what caused the flare-up at this stage. In that case, keep it as an open question at the back of your mind and an answer will most likely come to you. Once you've worked out the cause, then you know what to change and you can develop a plan of action. Your plan should include strategies to both physically and emotionally manage your flare-ups.

For some people, a flare-up can cause panic. Others prefer to ignore it in the hope that it will all be okay. Generally, neither of these approaches work. Instead, you need to see your flare-up as a problem you can solve. That is, you need to change from 'panic' mode or 'it will all turn out alright eventually' mode into 'investigating and finding solutions' mode.

You should also think about your current treatments. Some of them may be further aggravating your injury during a flare-up. You might need to modify treatments like stretching and strengthening until you start to feel better. This could be a good time to treat yourself to a massage!

## PHYSICAL SOLUTIONS

Sometimes we can get back on the road to recovery (or at least the road to well-being) by just changing what we do. Pacing, varying and cutting back on activities – especially those that are most aggravating – are really important.

You can also use strategies like using heat or cold (whatever works for you) to dampen down pain. Other things that can help include Epsom salts in a long hot bath to relax your muscles or a brisk walk to keep up your spirits.

## EMOTIONAL SOLUTIONS

When we are in pain, we often don't want to talk about it and withdraw from the people around us. Taking some time out might work for some of us, but for many, it's better to stay in touch with the people who make us feel good and care about us. Instead of spending a lot of time talking about how depressing it is to be in pain again, plan to do something enjoyable together, like seeing a funny movie, going for a walk or watching your favourite sport.

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If you feel you need counselling or help with pain management, you may be able to get a referral under Medicare from your doctor under the Better Access Scheme.

**RELAXATION** Learning to relax can be a very helpful way of coping with pain. Yoga classes often teach this but you can also download some really good relaxation scripts from the web. For **example, you can find a helpful script by googling 'relaxation exercise techniques'**.

Another useful technique for both relaxation and chronic pain management is practicing mindfulness. Mindfulness is a popular psychological technique which teaches you to become consciously aware of your thoughts, feelings, sensations and behaviour without being weighed down by them. Your doctor can refer you to a psychologist who specialises in teaching this technique for those with chronic pain, or you can learn mindfulness from a class at low cost. There are also excellent mindfulness scripts to download; you can find a good one by googling 'mindfulness scripts'.

If you start feeling panicky, there's a technique called '5-4-3-2-1' that some people find very helpful. The aim is to 'ground' yourself by stopping, slowing, naming and noticing:

1. Five things you can see.
2. Four things you can hear.
3. Three things you can feel, like your feet on the ground and your hands on your lap.
4. Two things you can smell (or would like to).
5. One long slow breath.

Focusing on your breathing is another quick and useful technique to help yourself calm and relax. Focus on slowing your breathing and lengthening your outbreaths. There is a scientific basis behind this: when you breathe out slowly, your parasympathetic nervous system kicks in. The parasympathetic nervous system (nicknamed the 'rest and digest' system) functions to relax and slow the body down. It does this by decreasing your heart rate and reducing muscle tension so you don't notice as many physical signs of panic or pain.

## COMMUNICATION

You may need to change the way you communicate to cope well with a flare-up. This could be a good time to practice asking for help. Are you too independent to ask for help from people who in fact would be very willing to give it? Do you feel shy about asking for help?

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### AT WORK

If the cause of your flare-up is connected with work, you may need to think about changing the way you communicate. For example, do you need to learn to say no? Or maybe allow yourself to be less independent than you want to be and ask for help? Do you need to develop skills in prioritising work? In practice, these skills can be hard to learn and quite threatening to try out in a difficult workplace situation. You could try talking over and practicing these strategies with friends or with a professional counsellor or psychologist.

### BE CAREFUL!

In order to cope with the sadness that a flare-up can make us feel, it's common to reach out for that extra glass of wine, box of chocolates or packet of chips – whatever comfort food is available. Don't go overboard on these – they're only a short-term fix, if that. Avoid making any big decisions while you're feeling bad and put off any discussions that could turn difficult. You won't be at your best and it can be hard to think clearly and stay calm.

### APPLYING THESE IDEAS

When you're in pain it can be hard to step back and develop a plan of action. So, you can (mentally) prepare a pain flare-up toolkit. This could be just a list on the fridge that reminds you that there are things you can do that will help, things that you enjoy and help to distract you from the pain. Some suggestions include:

- Heat packs or heat rubs
- Pain medication (if you use this too often, it won't be as effective when you really need it – like during your flare-ups)
- Some bath salts for a long relaxing bath
- Some relaxation or mindfulness scripts

Keep hold of the fact that your flare-up is only temporary and that it will pass — and when it does pass, you've probably learnt some useful skills for avoiding — or at least postponing — the next one!



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