

LIVING WITH PAIN

Penney Cowan, Executive Director, American Chronic Pain Association

Managing life today can be difficult. Managing life with pain is even more challenging, but it is possible. There are ways to balance your life so that you can live the way you choose, rather than allowing your illness to dictate your life. The key is for you to become an active member of the treatment team. It is important to understand what your responsibilities are to ensure a quality lifestyle. Your health care team will do all they can to provide the necessary medical care, but you are responsible for much of the day-to-day routine.

First, you must clearly understand what your needs are. Personal needs can range from finding a balance between getting proper rest and physical exercise to taking medications and reducing stress. While managing illness and pain involves complex issues, the majority of the components are simple common sense, good living skills. Things such as good nutrition, open communication with family, asserting yourself so that your needs are met, and finding a balance between activity and rest are all keys to successfully managing pain.

It is important to recognize your limitations to prevent becoming overly tired or risking increased pain levels. Staying within your limits can enhance your ability to think clearly and concentrate on important tasks. Understanding your personal needs will provide a means to develop a workable plan so that you can incorporate daily tasks into your daily routine.

An excellent way to ensure that necessary tasks are completed while bringing you one step closer to independence is to journalize. Balancing daily activities with necessary rest periods is easier when you have a written record of your endurance while accomplishing everyday tasks.

Your journal can also provide you with insight into daily stressors. Reducing stress is vital in the fight against pain. Muscles that are already painful will experience increased pain as your stress level increases and your muscles tighten.

Recognizing and understanding feelings are another important component to successful pain management. When you ignore feelings, they do not go away, but show up as increased tension, feeling out-of-sorts, or even anger. Dealing with feelings as they occur can greatly reduce both stress and pain levels. Your journal, with its daily entries, can become your roadmap to wellness and provide you with a sense of empowerment.

Daily exercise should also become a routine activity. Simple stretches can strengthen muscles, improve circulation, and maintain energy levels. Ask your doctor about an exercise program designed to fit your ability.

When you plan your day, keep in mind your need to pace activities according to your ability for that particular day. A simple way to remember the importance of pacing is found in the letters of the word PACE.

P ... is for *prioritizing* your tasks to ensure that the most important ones are done first.

A ... is for *planning your actions* to ensure the best use of your time.

C ... is to remind yourself that your physical *comfort* is important. If a task creates increased pain levels, then perhaps you need to ask for help.

E ... is for *energy*. Energy levels are never the same from day to day.

You need to consider how much energy you have at the beginning of each day to ensure you are working and playing within your ability.

By combining PACE – priorities, action, comfort, and energy – with your personal commitment to a “near-normal” life, you can begin to feel like a person rather than a patient. ■

Penny Cowan is the founder and executive director of the American Chronic Pain Association (ACPA). The ACPA is spear-heading *Partners for Understanding Pain*, a campaign to elevate the awareness of chronic and acute pain and pain caused by cancer, and to facilitate a whole-person approach to pain management. (800-533-2075, www.theacpa.org).