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**Blackpool Teaching  
Hospitals**

NHS Foundation Trust

# **Persistent Pain Fear Avoidance Workbook**

**Musculoskeletal Physiotherapy Team  
Patient Information Leaflet**



## From a young age we learn about pain

Our personal experiences and those of others influence the meaning we give to pain and how we behave when in pain.

One important lesson is that pain may be a sign of injury and that resting is sometimes necessary to allow healing.

So if we bang or twist a limb it is quite normal to feel pain, actually we expect pain and it would be odd if we did not feel it.

The usual advice is to take it easy, perhaps use ice, heat or pain relief. In this case pain is a warning that something is damaged and resting will allow it time to get better.

Over the next few hours, days or weeks, depending on the severity of the injury, the pain fades away and we get back to using the limb normally.

This gradual return to our activities helps the healing tissues align in the optimum way to be strong yet allow normal movements.

# Our clever danger alarm system

Pain is part of a danger alarm system that our body has to keep us safe and healthy.

A pin prick in the finger causes a small sensor in the skin to be triggered that sends an electrical signal along the nerves up to the brain via the spinal cord.

Whether we feel it or not depends on the priority the brain gives this amongst lots of other signals it is receiving from all over the body.

If you step on a thorn in the garden you will probably know about it, but if you were in the jungle with a tiger chasing you then probably you would not.

The point here is that whether pain is produced, and how much, is controlled by the brain.

This is all part of a very complicated system designed to keep us safe and healthy in the potentially hazardous environment we all live in.

Not only is pain produced but other body systems are activated.

These include those that produce hormones, fight infection, repair tissues, alter muscle activity, and even formulate thoughts.

**All this to look after us.**

## Persistent pain is different

A useful definition of persistent pain is: **pain that persists beyond the time it takes for tissues to heal.**

We have a good knowledge of how long it normally takes the body to heal.

For example most ligament or muscle injuries heal in 6 to 12 weeks, bones take 3 months to repair and 1 year or more to remodel (return to a more normal shape).

These are biological processes that we cannot speed-up, although poor management can slow the process down.

# Pain can persist even though the healing process has been completed

In this condition known as **persistent pain**, the pain is rarely a sign that you are damaging yourself.

It is now known that much of this type of pain is due to an increased sensitivity of the body's danger warning system and sometimes a loss of fitness resulting from reduced physical activity.

Changes in numerous body systems amplify the pain response to stimuli such as movement, touch and emotional upset.

Put more simply, things that used to not feel painful start to become painful and those that used to feel slightly painful start to feel very painful.

For many people with persistent pain even the gentlest of pressure feels painful.

Yet this is just gentle pressure on the skin not enough to affect any of the deeper structures.

This sensitivity is caused by subtle changes to the body's danger alarm system resulting in an excessive pain response to what should be the sensation of gentle touch.

# Hurt does not always mean harm

A key message is that the pain experienced in persistent pain does not always mean you are causing yourself damage.

In fact it very rarely does.

This can lead to what might appear to be a slightly vague diagnosis such as degenerative changes, arthritis, myofascial pain syndrome, fibromyalgia, mechanical lower back pain.

In all these conditions it is also changes in the body's danger alarm system discussed earlier that can have a crucial role to play in the persistence of pain.

## **The problem:**

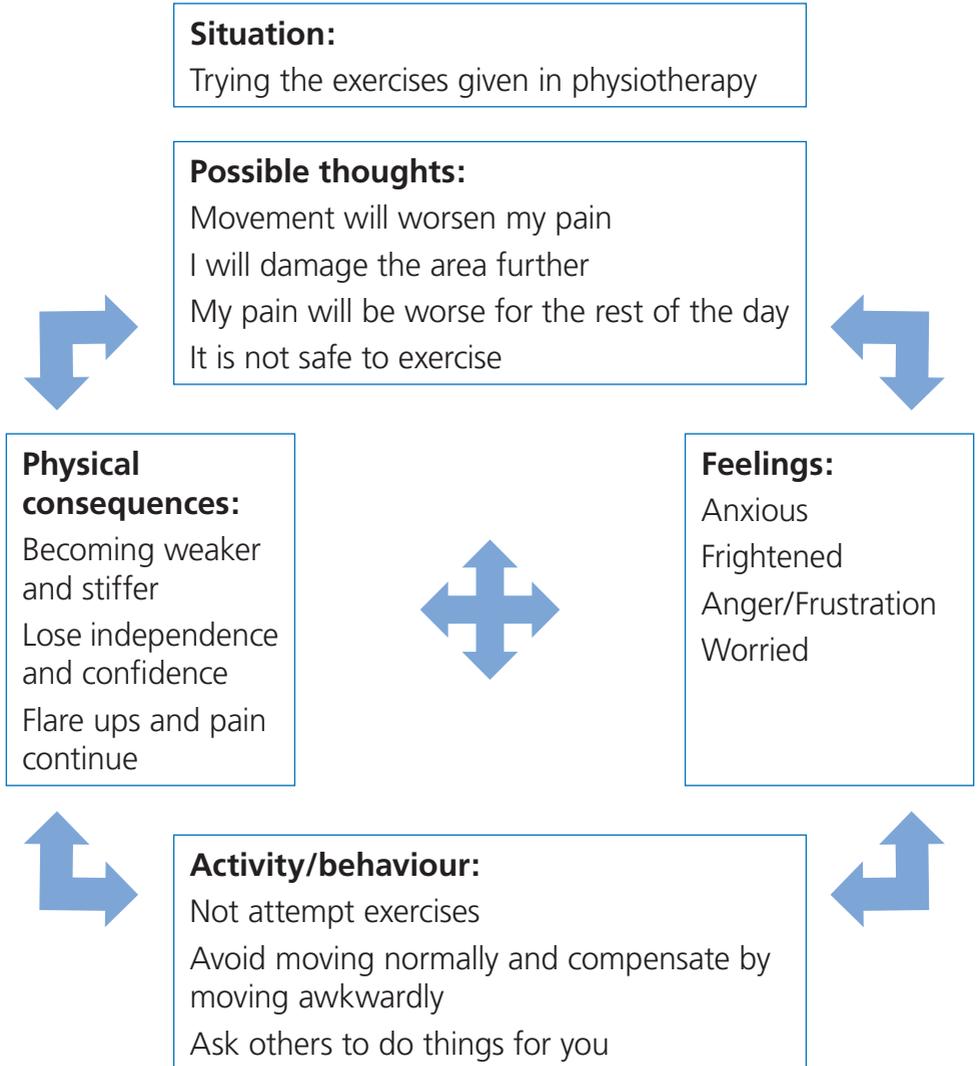
Avoiding activities that cause the pain tends to maintain the sensitised alarm system and lead to deconditioning of the body which itself feeds back into the pain problem.

So if I think I might injure myself, or flare up my pain by a certain activity, it can lead to a feeling of worry.

If I am worried then I am likely to change the way I do that activity. However this is likely to cause some loss of physical fitness so when I try and do the activity and it is difficult or painful it re-enforces the idea that it will cause injury or flare-up.

# A nasty vicious cycle!

The diagram below gives an example of this cycle for someone with pain worried about starting to move and exercise:



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Are there any simple activities that you are avoiding specific to you?

Try listing them in this box:



Choose one of these activities and consider the following:

- What are the thoughts you have when faced with that activity?
- How does it make you feel?
- How does that change what you do?
- Are there consequences to this?

# Try completing the blank cycle beneath

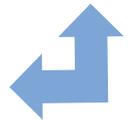
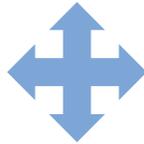
Situation:

Possible thoughts:



Physical consequences:

Feelings:



Activity/behaviour:

## How to break this vicious cycle

If you accept that the pain is not necessarily a sign that you are damaging yourselves, but rather the outcome of an oversensitive danger warning system, then it is possible to break into this cycle. By deciding what you want in life and finding ways to work towards it you will start to get more active.

As you stop avoiding movement and do more, the body recognises that this is not harmful and the alarm system becomes less sensitive.

Slowly you notice you can do more before the pain worsens. Gradually the body gets stronger, more supple and gains stamina. You get less really bad times (pain flare ups) as you become physically more able to cope with increased activity.

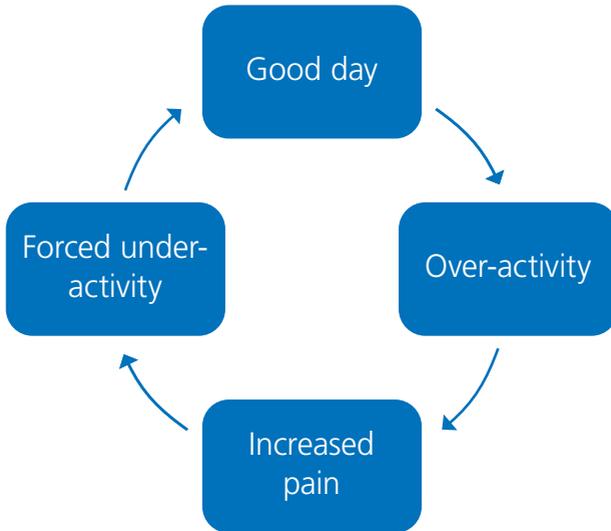
The best way to do this is in a planned way led by goals based on where you want life to go.

It is often helpful to use gentle exercise to get moving, pacing of activities to try and reduce unhelpful pain flare ups, and a gradual increase in activity to allow the body time to get used to new things.

## Pacing

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- Boom and bust cycle is unhelpful.
- Limits your exercise progression and can cause pain flare ups.



- You can break the boom and bust cycle through **GRADED ACTIVITY**.
- Graded activity involves gradually increasing activity in a step wise manner at a rate that is manageable.
- This helps you to **SUSTAIN** activity levels day after day and means you are less likely to overdo it.
- Remember pain is normal. It is ok to feel some pain with exercise if you have persistent pain.
- Hurt does not equal harm.

# Goal Setting

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This is important for successful change to be made.

- Short and Long Term Goals.
- Meaningful.
- SMART.
  - Specific.
  - Measurable.
  - Achievable.
  - Relevant.
  - Timed.

What would be an appropriate SMART goal for you?

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# **For further information please have a look at the following:**

## **YouTube**

Understanding pain in less than 5 minutes and what to do about it!  
<https://www.youtube.com>

## **WEBSITES**

[www.paintoolkit.org](http://www.paintoolkit.org)

[www.painconcern.org.uk](http://www.painconcern.org.uk)

[www.nhsmoodzone](http://www.nhsmoodzone)

[www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/the-eatwell-guide/](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/the-eatwell-guide/)

[www.arthritisresearchuk.org](http://www.arthritisresearchuk.org)

[www.nhschoiceseatwell](http://www.nhschoiceseatwell)

## **ACTIVE BLACKPOOL**

The Active Blackpool referral scheme is a programme of physical activity designed to help you to improve your health and quality of life. Your Active Blackpool instructor will help you choose a physical activity programme to suit your health and fitness needs. Your GP or physiotherapist can refer you if you live in the Blackpool Area.

## **Y ACTIVE**

This scheme is funded by Lancashire County Council and working in partnership with local authorities and the NHS, YMCA Fylde Coast deliver a series of FREE and subsidised, health and physical activity programmes.

You can self-refer if you live in Fylde and Wyre to YMCA'S Your Move team by going online <http://ymcayactive.org/health-wellbeing/> and click on the 'Your Move' section. Please ask your physiotherapist for help should you need to.



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# Other sources of information:



**Hospital switchboard**  
Telephone: **01253 300000**

## Patient Relations Department

The Patient Relations Department offer impartial advice and deal with any concerns or complaints the Trust receives.



You can contact them via tel: **01253 955589**  
or by email: **bfwh.patientrelations@nhs.net**



You can also write to us at: Patient Relations Department, Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, Blackpool Victoria Hospital, Whinney Heys Road, Blackpool FY3 8NR



Further information is available on our website: **www.bfwh.nhs.uk**

If you'd like a large print, audio, Braille or a translated version of this booklet then please call: **01253 955520**



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