

Pacing: Balancing Activity and Rest

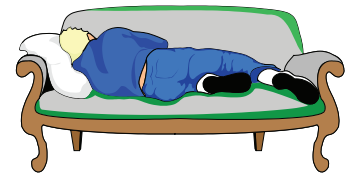
Sandra M. LeFort, PhD, RN

Overview

Striking a balance between activity and rest can be difficult when you have chronic pain. This chapter will give you some ideas about how to pace your activities so that you can manage your time better. After all, you still want to enjoy life and do the things you want to do in spite of your chronic pain.

Out of Balance: The Problems

One difficulty experienced by many people with chronic pain is balancing activity and rest. Some people with chronic pain rest almost all the time. They started this when their pain was in the early stages thinking that rest would help, but it didn't. Now, they have become so out of shape that movement of any kind hurts — not so much because of their chronic pain but because their muscles have become shortened, and are tight and tense because they haven't exercised. Or, they find that they don't have the stamina to keep on at a task for even short periods of time. Again, this is most likely due to poor muscle strength.



Resting too much has many other negative effects which lead to more disability and more pain in the long run. Dr. Bortz, who has studied the effects of inactivity, has coined the term "the disuse syndrome". His research showed that physical inactivity leads to deterioration of virtually all body functions, from our heart, to our bones, to our mental state. Did you know that you can lose up to 10% of your muscle strength and muscle mass by being inactive for just one week? The lesson here is that resting all the time is not good for your health and wellbeing, and it is not good for your chronic pain!



The flip side of those who rest too much are the people who force themselves until they get all their work done. They push on despite their pain at whatever cost and then they collapse in terrible pain at the end of the day. To get through the day, they may have taken extra pain medication, may have been irritable and not very pleasant to be around. Yes, they do accomplish their goal, but they often have to take time off to recover. Recovery can be slow and depressing! These people are in a vicious cycle of "feel better — push yourself — more pain — collapse".

Pacing

Both the “too much rest” group and the “big push” group could improve their situation with a technique called pacing. Pacing is knowing how to balance activity and rest so that you can accomplish the things you want to *every day*, while keeping your pain under control.

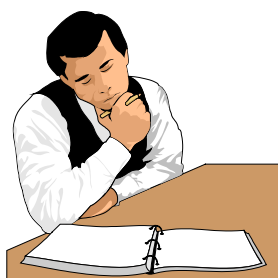
By trial and error you can find out what you can do and for how long without your pain increasing significantly or returning. For example, you may find that you can work at a certain activity for 30-minute periods, taking off 5 minutes every half hour.

Maybe you need 5 minutes rest for every 15 minutes activity. No matter. *The point is to find a reasonable comfort level while still being active.* Setting a timer helps you remember your rest periods.

Your rest periods might be a time for you to practice relaxation techniques, call a friend, listen to music, read the paper — whatever. At the end of the day you may discover that you worked productively for a total of 4 or 5 hours without increasing your pain. However, if you had pushed yourself to work 3 hours straight without a break, you might have increased pain and got a lot less done.

The idea of planning your activities and planning a rest break *before* your pain forces you to is a key technique of pacing and is called *working to schedule*. This is in contrast to working to tolerance. When you work to tolerance, you push

yourself to your limit. This is when pain begins to get worse. This does not need to happen if you take things slowly and if you systematically plan activity and rest. By planning and sticking to your plan, YOU are in control not your pain!



Making a Time Schedule

Where does your time go? What activities do you do in the normal course of a day? The best way to find out is to keep a diary of your activities for a couple of days. (Be sure to include at least one weekday and a day on the weekend). Just take a blank piece of paper, mark down each hour, and jot down all your activities including your rest times. Note the amount of time you spend doing each activity. Also note whether your pain stayed the same, increased, or decreased when doing the activity. Another way to monitor your pain levels is to use a 0 to 10 pain intensity scale. 0 represents no pain at all while 10 represents the worst pain imaginable. You can rate your pain using this scale during different activities. (See Chapter 11, Pain Intensity, page 11 – 7, for more instructions.)

Once you have your diary notes, you will get a sense of how you actually spend your time — the activities you do, how long you do them — and what happens to your pain. Now you are able to see whether you are resting so much that you accomplish very little in your day, or whether you push yourself too much, spending too long at an activity before taking a rest.

Dr. Corey who runs a rehabilitation program for people with chronic pain in Toronto suggests a 3-point program for pacing. Why not try the following hints?

1. Each evening, prepare a schedule for the following day. Decide the night before what time you will get up in the morning and what your activities will be. Establish *realistic* goals and ask yourself “What do I really want to get done tomorrow?” It is important not to overschedule your activities. With each activity you schedule, try to think about how certain you are that you can do the activity even on a “bad day”. If you are not at least 80% sure that you can do the activity, you may be taking on too much. So cut back so that you will be able to meet your activity schedule. Over time, you will build up what you are able to do.
2. Schedule rest periods during the day, and take them at the times you have specified. You should be able to figure out from your activity diary how long you can do an activity before your pain increases. For example, you may be able to peel vegetables for supper for only 10 minutes before getting increased pain in your neck and shoulders. So schedule a rest period for every 10 minutes of meal preparation activity. The same person might be able to sit at a computer for 30 minutes before pain increases. So schedule rest after 30 minutes for this activity.

Taking a break is not a sign of weakness or of failure; it is a wise move to allow you to gradually build up your stamina. As you improve, you may be able to reduce the number and duration of your rest periods.

For those of you who go out to work, it may not always be possible to schedule a rest break. In that case, can you change your activity, or change your body position for a few minutes? After all, sometimes a change is as good as a rest! Make use of your coffee and lunch breaks to relax.

3. Make sure *all* the time periods in the day are filled with activities and rest breaks. Every hour of the day should be accounted for. This encourages you to be time-oriented rather than pain-oriented. You tend to concentrate on your activity, rather than on your discomfort, knowing that a rest break is coming up. Use rest breaks to their full advantage. You can spend the time productively in relaxation, doing gentle exercise, reading, or calling a friend. The thing not to do is worry!

Remember



- ◆ Inactivity is harmful to your physical and mental health as well as to your chronic pain.
- ◆ Pushing yourself to keep on at a task without taking a rest results in more pain and the need for increased recovery time.
- ◆ Balancing your activity and rest is called pacing.

- ◆ Pacing involves:
 - Planning realistic activities each day.
 - Planning several rest periods during the day.
 - Resting before the pain gets worse.
- ◆ Using a timer will remind you of your rest periods.
- ◆ Organize your activities and avoid rushing.

References

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