



Moving From the Cycle of Pain to a Cycle of Wellness



Introduction | When you live with chronic pain and a disability that limits your ability to move, learning new skills and ways to cope can help you do more of what you want and need to do.^{1,2,3}

The Pain Cycle: How Physical, Emotional, and Social Circumstances Make Chronic Pain Worse

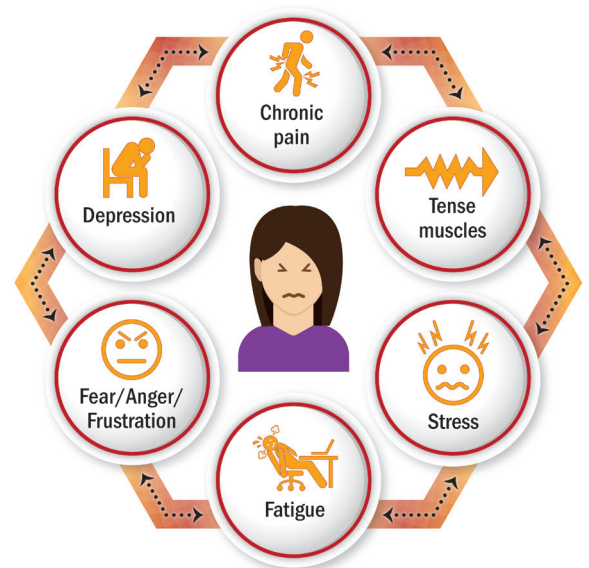
People with severe arthritis are aware of changes to their body that lead to chronic pain and disability. But they may be less aware of how lifestyle choices and daily practices can help them do everyday activities with less pain. Many of these practices can also improve other health conditions, leading to better overall health.

The Pain and Wellness Cycles

The Pain Cycle

Figure 1 shows the six parts of the **pain cycle**. These six parts reinforce each other and add to the pain one feels. For example, stress often leads to tight shoulder muscles. This can make pain worse for people who have osteoarthritis in the neck or spine. Joint pain can lead to sleepless nights, which can increase fatigue and make depression worse. A person can get stuck in the pain cycle. Breaking the cycle with self-management strategies may reduce your pain.

Figure 1. Pain Cycle



The Wellness Cycle

The **wellness cycle** shows self-management strategies that work together to reduce pain (Figure 2). Examples of these strategies include becoming more active, learning to relax through meditation, and building a support network of friends and wellness experts who can help you. Pain management strategies are different for each person. Finding the right blend of strategies requires a willingness to learn by trial and error. With an open mind, you may be surprised to learn what works for you.

See these *Knowledge Hub* resources for ideas on how you can manage chronic pain:

- [Developing a Plan for Self-Management of Pain](#)
- [Methods for Managing Chronic Pain Other Than Medication](#)

Figure 2. Wellness Cycle



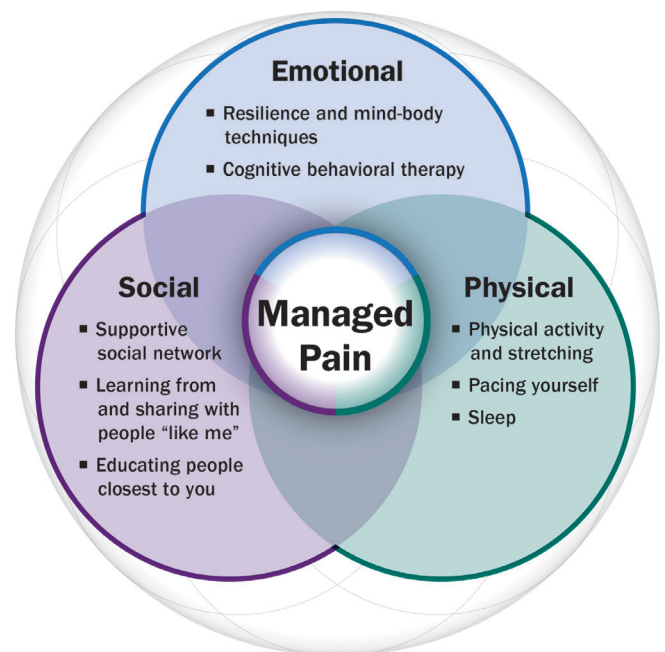
Strategies for Self-Managing Pain

You play the most important role in managing your pain. Much of what you can do to control your pain happens in your life every day. Your physical and emotional health, as well as social support, play a part in managing your pain. (See Figure 3.) Improvement won't happen overnight, but with persistence and patience, you may find that you feel much better. To start, make small changes in what you do each day. Build on your successes. Start by trying one approach for a few weeks. If it doesn't work, try another strategy. Over time, the small changes you make will become habits that improve your well-being.

Here is a resource with ways to self-manage pain:

- **Self-Care, Pain Guide, University of Michigan:** This web resource provides detailed information about exercise, pacing yourself, nutrition supplements, ways to relax, reframing your thoughts, resilience, managing emotions, communication skills, sleep, acupressure, spirituality, and ergonomics/posture.

Figure 3. Ingredients for Self-Managing Pain



Physical

Staying active will make a difference in how you feel. Regular physical activity when you hurt may not make sense, but it can help you feel better. Activity helps your body make endorphins, which are natural pain reducers. Being active will make your muscles stronger and more flexible. It also helps with body weight, blood circulation, and general physical and mental well-being. The key to reducing chronic pain is to start slowly with low-impact physical activities, build on your success, and make exercise part of your daily routine. Low-impact activities put very little stress on the body. Examples include walking, swimming, and cycling.

A combination of activities is best:

- Yoga or stretching to improve flexibility and range of motion. Range of motion means how far your joints can move in different directions.
- Use of low-impact weights or resistance bands to strengthen the muscles around the joints.
- Low-impact aerobic activity like walking, biking, elliptical training, water exercise programs, and chair exercise to control weight and strengthen the heart.

If you are less fit or flexible, an occupational therapist or physical therapist can help you get started. They will measure your muscle strength and range of motion; then they will suggest activities to improve your strength and flexibility. An occupational therapist can also show you new ways to do everyday activities to reduce pain and increase your quality of life. They can show you new ways to function and be active while avoiding or decreasing your pain. For example, an occupational therapist may introduce you to adaptive equipment (for example, a reaching tool to keep you from bending or reaching above your shoulders), suggest ways to simplify steps for doing certain tasks, and help you rearrange items in your kitchen so you can reach them with less or no pain. You can find other helpful resources, like online videos and suggestions for community programs in the *Knowledge Hub*, such as the *Knowledge Hub* resource [Methods for Managing Chronic Pain Other Than Medication](#). The [Arthritis Foundation](#) is also a good source of information.

Emotional

Ongoing pain can make you feel irritable, tired, anxious, and even trapped. These feelings can lead to depression and hopelessness. Negative thoughts about yourself and your pain can make these feelings worse. You can learn how to change your negative thoughts and seek out activities to help you better manage your chronic pain. People who learn healthy thinking strategies report having a better mood and improved functioning compared to people who rely on wishful thinking.⁴

Try these practices to improve your healthy thinking:

- Use positive self-talk.
- Write down small victories and things you are grateful for.
- Focus on where you are and what you are doing in the moment instead of the past or future.
- Challenge negative thoughts and consider how you can look at things a different way.
- Choose activities that give your life meaning.
- Seek out people who support you.

If you have a hard time finding meaningful or relaxing activities you can do because of a disability, an occupational therapist can help you.

Here is a resource to help you learn more about how to change negative self-talk to positive self-talk:

- **[Mayo Mindfulness: Overcoming Negative Self-Talk \(Mayo Clinic\)](#)**: This article describes negative self-talk and provides examples of positive and negative self-talk.

Social

A supportive network of family, friends, coworkers, and other people who face similar challenges can improve coping. They can also help with problem solving and provide assistance.

You can develop your social network through simple actions:

- Talk with a neighbor, call a friend, become a volunteer, or join a group activity or class.
- Stay connected to family and friends through video chat, online photo sharing, instant messaging, or email.
- Join reputable online forums and groups for peer support and problem solving.

Living with chronic pain and disability may feel isolating at times, even with a strong support network. People may not understand how someone can look fine but have a lot of pain. They may not realize how routine activities can be a struggle. They may not understand why you need rest breaks or cancel plans at the last minute. If you take opioids to manage pain, you may even feel others are judging you or are too concerned. You can help the people closest to you by educating them about your arthritis and chronic pain. This can help them understand what you face and how they can help.



Resources for Family and Friends on Living With Chronic Pain

[Families and Arthritis: Loving and Supporting Someone With Arthritis \(University of Washington\)](#) | This web page describes how families can support someone living with disability and chronic pain from arthritis.

[Creaky Joints: Life With Arthritis](#) | This web page describes how to explain your arthritis to family and friends.



For more information visit: Partnering for Better Chronic Pain Management and Safer Opioid Use: A Knowledge Hub for People With Disability and Their Providers | KnowledgeHub.air.org

Endnotes

- 1 Holtrop, J. S., Fisher, M., Martinez, D. E., Simpson, M. S., Awadallah, N. S., Nease, D. E., . . . Westfall, J. M. (2019). What works for managing chronic pain: An appreciative Inquiry qualitative analysis. *Journal of Primary Care and Community Health, 10*, 1–8. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6873267/>
- 2 Owens, J. E., Menard, M., Plews-Ogan, M., Calhoun, L. G., & Ardelt, M. (2016). Stories of growth and wisdom: A mixed-methods study of people living well with pain. *Global Advances in Health and Medicine, 5*(1), 16–28. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4756773/pdf/gahmj.2015.065.pdf>
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- 4 Sturgeon, J. A., Zautra, A. J. (2016). Social pain and physical pain: Shared paths to resilience. *Pain Management, 6*(1), 63–74.

Partnering for Better Chronic Pain Management and Safer Opioid Use: A Knowledge Hub for People With Disability and Their Providers was developed by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) under a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR), grant number 90DPGE0006. NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this brief do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, and HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

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