

Long-term impact of fear avoidance

Fear avoidance is a term that is used to describe the desire NOT to engage in an activity due to

- Fear that this may harm the body
- Fear that this will cause an increase in pain

Fear avoidance is somewhat helpful with acute pain as it helps us rest to let the body recover from an injury or illness. However, fear avoidance becomes a barrier to recovery when pain persists after the body has healed. Going from day to day, it makes sense to try and simply avoid anything that causes more pain. However, fear of pain today can stop you from considering the long-term impact of not doing things you enjoy and value. As a person experiencing persistent pain you need to weigh up the short- versus long-term risks and benefits of fear avoidance as shown below

TODAY			
The benefit of fear avoidance	Risks with fear avoidance	Benefit of engaging in valued activities	Risks with engaging in valued activities
Your pain hasn't been made worse.	Loss of participation	Benefits of participation	Your pain has been made worse
	Reduced physical activity	Physically active	
	More time to think about pain and its impact on your life	Mentally engaged	
	Less time with friends and family	Sense of connection and belonging	
	Loss of feeling purposeful	Meaningful living	
IN A YEAR'S TIME			
The benefit of fear avoidance	Risks with fear avoidance	Benefit of engaging in valued activities	Risks with engaging in valued activities
	Your pain has worsened	Your pain is less or no worse	
	Your body has deconditioned	You have maintained physical conditioning for things you regularly do	
	You are spending more time thinking about your pain and how to avoid it flaring up	You feel more in charge of your life	
	You may experience low mood and grief for your losses and feel more worried about stirring up your pain	You better manage the impact of pain on your life	

Fear Avoidance and Activity Management with Persistent Pain

The good news: If you acknowledge the presence your pain and keep doing the things that matter to you—even if you need to adjust or pause for a while—you can feel better and improve your health.



Image by illustrator Sarah Wilkins

This image shows a person moving up a gently rising pathway. At the base of the hill, the person is seen tentatively opening a door and stepping outside, representing the fear of engaging with physical activity when living with pain.

Along the way, the person does a variety of activities; rests on a park bench, stands, walks a dog, runs, rests again, and finally reaches for an apple from a tree at the summit. This shows how activity can be gradual and can change direction regardless of whether it is a good or bad day.

Parallel to the person's progress along the path, the image also shows the growth of a seedling (at the open door) through to a full grown tree (at the summit). This represents getting back to valued activities achieved through a slow and steady engagement in physical activity.