

## Kōkiri Taking Charge

Chronic pain has a powerful effect on how you see yourself as a person. Its constant presence can have a negative impact on your thoughts and feelings and sense of wellbeing. It can lower your confidence. Because pain influences so many aspects of your life it can end up dictating what you spend your time on, dominate your choices and limit your ability to be involved in things that are important to you with people that you care about.

Most people, whether they live with pain or not, base what they do and how much they do, on how they feel. You may know how your day is going to go as soon as you wake up, based on how much pain you are in. Sometimes you might be so overwhelmed with your pain that you literally can't do anything for a whole day, or more. At other times you may find yourself locked in a battle with your pain, refusing to give in to it, but "paying for it" later because you have to spend time recovering.

How does pain manage to get itself "in charge" of these situations? Part of the reason is that if pain is demanding all your attention, whether you are trying to avoid it or whether you are battling with it, then it makes it hard to focus on anything else.

Our brain causes us to have a pain experience in the presence of what it perceives as a threat or a danger to us. This is a deeply "hardwired" protective system working at a subconscious level. Fear, either conscious or subconscious, is part of our protective system and part of the "fight, flight or freeze" response. Our system can remember and learn from previous experiences and can get "over protective" becoming less helpful as a guide to actual threat or damage to our body. It becomes an over sensitive and very "noisy" alarm system.

The combined effect of all this can make you avoid activities, both physical and social, that cause you pain. It can also make you fearful of even trying. Sometimes that fear can be more disabling than the pain itself. If you believe that an activity or particular movement is going to cause you more pain or harm, it is a natural response to avoid it. Unfortunately, with chronic pain, avoidance can cause more problems than it solves and it can make your pain worse.

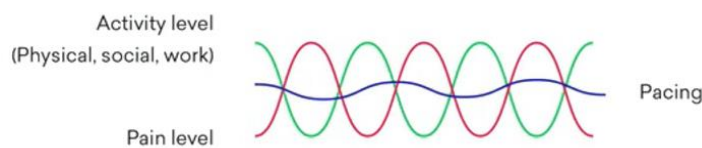
A common pattern to fall into with long term pain is to do more of an activity (whether it is physical or something else) when the pain feels better, often trying to "catch up" or do as much as you can until the pain stops you. If you fall into a pattern of doing a lot followed by prolonged periods of recovery time when you can't do very much, if anything at all, it can be very unhelpful. This pattern is called "boom busting".

The problem with this pattern is not that you are doing something it is the fact that the repeated periods of recovery time trigger a threat response in your pain system. In response to that perceived threat the pain can be generated earlier and more frequently in order to try and "protect" you from that activity. Over time, despite your best efforts you may find that you have more pain and are able to do less.

By changing how you go about your everyday tasks you can reduce the peaks of pain and the troughs of inactivity. Read more in the module about how you can use pacing and scheduling to help you with this.

### Pacing

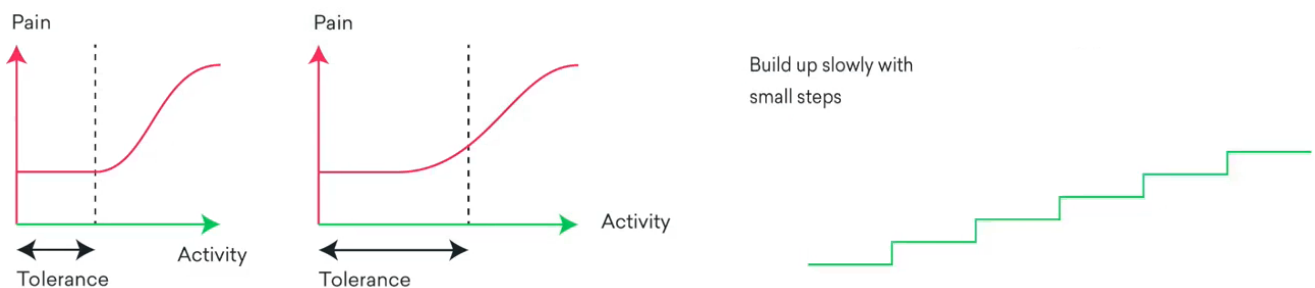
Pacing does not mean giving in to the pain and it doesn't mean doing less. Quite the opposite, it helps you to take charge. You decide what you want to do, and how and when you will go about it, despite living with pain. Take charge by basing your decisions on how you spend your time despite your pain rather than because of your pain.



The general idea is to spread that activity out as evenly as you can into manageable chunks. It is often applied to physical activities but the same principles apply to socialising, or to activities that require concentration like reading or using a computer.

The other important part of pacing is that it works better if you have a schedule, routine or a plan in place that works for you. It must be a routine that you stick to rather than basing it on how you feel. A lot of people find this approach a helpful way to manage day to day or weekly activities.

### Graded Exposure



Graded exposure helps with avoidance and helps to reassure your protective system and build up your tolerance over time for any activity, physical or social. Tolerance is built by exposure to the threat in small amounts over time. Be kind to yourself, you know now that your system is hardwired to respond the way it does, it is not a failing on your part - it is only trying to protect you, but remind yourself that you have chosen something that really isn't a true threat.

*Tip: Keep your day regular and repeatable: Schedule your day and go steady. Don't do too much on a "good" day or too little on a "bad" day. Take regular breaks even if it means not finishing something until later.*



