



# Managing Activity when Back Pain Persists

Working Minds UK

[www.working-minds.org.uk](http://www.working-minds.org.uk)

## **How to manage your daily activity when back pain persists**

Many people with persistent back pain have had to adapt their activity levels. This often has a huge impact on their quality of life, as they find it difficult to plan their life properly. They find there are good and bad days, social engagements get rearranged, leisure pursuits and work opportunities diminish as their ability to do normal day-to-day activities diminishes. However, on some days they find they can do lots of activity, but then almost always pay for it later with a flare-up and have to rest again due to their pain. This is very frustrating and sets up a cycle of ongoing poor function, which contributes to keeping the nervous system sensitive and maintaining the back pain.

However, it doesn't have to be like this, and there is a way to address this successfully. To do this you first need to look at how you manage your activity on a day-to-day basis currently

### **Have you learnt to avoid activities that hurt?**

Whatever we do in life, if we have a bad experience, we are less likely to do that activity again in the future. Imagine going out for a meal to a restaurant and having a bad experience. The starter was cold, the wine was warm, the service was slow and the waiters were rude. You leave early, as the manager isn't prepared to acknowledge your poor experience and you feel annoyed. You warn your friends to avoid going there. You learn from your experience that the restaurant is unpleasant and this motivates you to avoid going back there.

The same learning process occurs with some people when their back pain becomes persistent. Because back pain is unpleasant, the logical thing to do is to avoid the unpleasant sensations. The best way to do this is to learn to avoid activities that feel unpleasant. You just don't go there. However, in time this strategy is a slippery slope down. It becomes a habit and leads to withdrawing from more and more activities. This may have relatively minor consequences, or lead to major consequences as a whole way of life comes to a grinding halt.

Avoidance of activity is therefore a learned response, but the good news is that it can be unlearned, allowing you to recover function and improve your quality of life.

## Avoidance and damage beliefs

As well as learning to avoid activities because they are unpleasant and associated with pain, we also recognize that some (but not all) people with persistent low back pain learn to avoid activity because they fear they are going to cause more damage to their back and develop worrying thoughts associated with this fear. This fear can play a key role in preventing recovery from back pain as the figure below illustrates

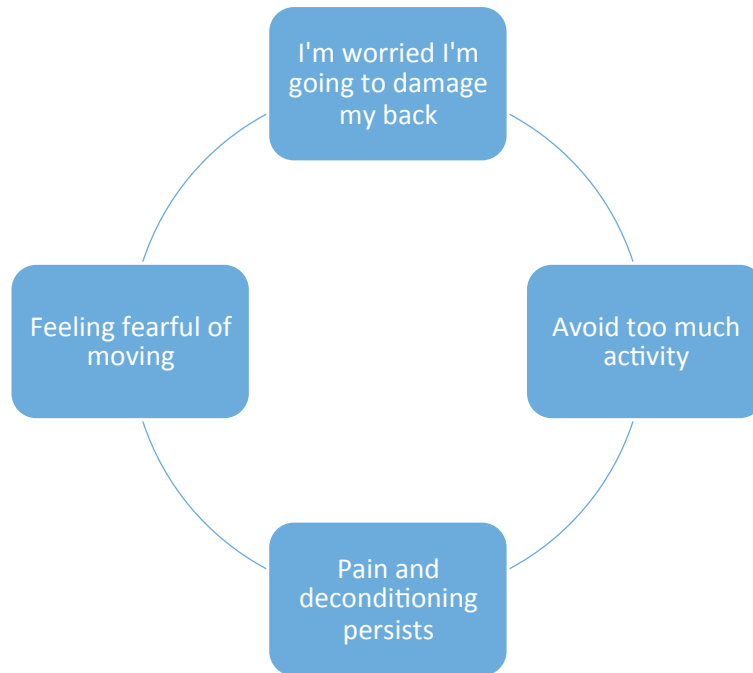


Figure – how feeling fearful and the worrying thoughts that accompany fear can prevent recovery

So if you tend to avoid activities due to your back pain, because it feels unpleasant or you are worried you will cause damage to your back, it is helpful to understand that it is highly unlikely that damage is being caused. This information may provide you with some encouragement that increasing activity is achievable, safe in the knowledge that you won't damage yourself.

## Do you over-do it, then pay for it later?

We have so far only looked at people who have tended to avoid activity (for a variety of seemingly logical reasons) due to their back pain. However, while some people reduce their activity in response to pain, other people respond to back pain differently. They have good days where they seem to function very well, and are able to engage in quite high levels of activity during these phases,

but they then pay the price afterwards. They find that by overdoing activity on a good day, they then suffer a bad day the following day. There are often very logical reasons why people overdo activity. For example, there always seems so much to do or jobs have to be finished completely before they can rest. Even though they may have people around them who encourage them to take things a bit easier, they often struggle to abide by this, and get caught in a cycle of over and underactivity. This also can make it difficult to plan their lives with any consistency. Underlying reasons for this very common pattern of behavior include strong feelings of needing to do everything perfectly, inability to delegate tasks, a strong desire to please others all of the time or overcompensating in response to a set back in life.

Somewhat paradoxically it is pushing too hard on good days where they are going wrong.

We see many people who over-do activity. One very common theme for these people is that they find it difficult to say 'no'. They strive to please others all the time, whether that is at home or work and try to keep going no matter how much pain and suffering it is causing them. Something sooner or later has to give and they reach a point where they can do no more. They then have to stop many activities for a short period until they recover and they will find this deeply frustrating and typically berate themselves as a failure. This of course then keeps the pain volume turned up nice and loud as a vicious cycle develops. The figure below helps to demonstrate this

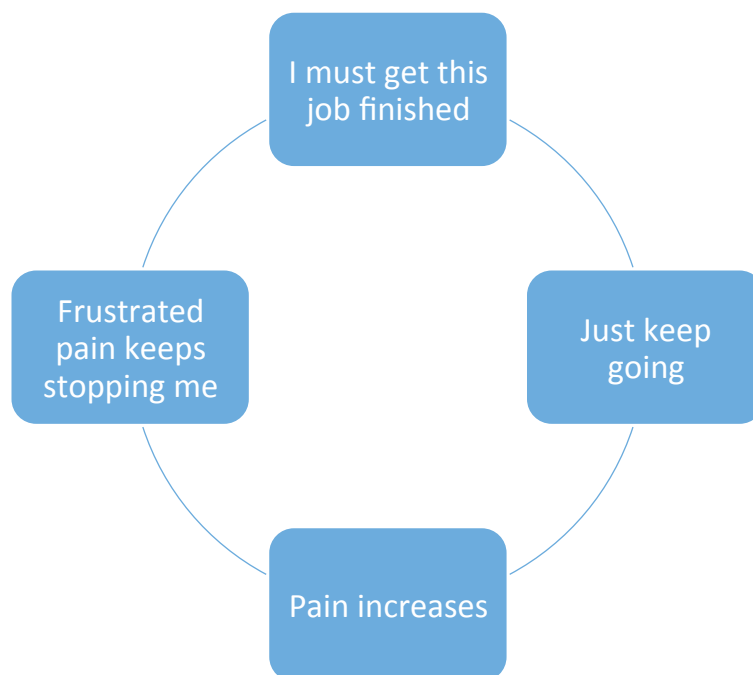


Figure – the vicious cycle of overdoing activity

So, if you tend to over-do activity and crash out with more pain, you are generating massive amounts of stress that keeps the nervous system hyper-vigilant and keeps on winding up your pain. It will prevent recovery from occurring until you learn to change your response

## **A new approach to managing your activity levels**

### **Graded activity**

Now you have identified how your back pain influences your activity levels, you can start to look at how to apply a graded approach.

When you use a graded activity approach it might feel like the wrong thing to do: if you have tended to avoid activity any increase will very likely increase discomfort in the short term; if you have tended to overdo activity then putting the brakes on will feel uncomfortable for you for different reasons This is normal and continuing with your plan, even when you feel worse initially is important to restore function and quality of life.

It is also okay to feel somewhat sceptical to start with. Habitual patterns of activity can be very hard to change initially. Give it a try. Remember that even small beginnings are reconnecting neural circuits within your central nervous system. The more they get used the stronger the connections become.

### **Make a Start**

- Choose an activity you wish to do more of - this could include walking, doing the gardening, going swimming, or travelling to somewhere you like which is a good distance away
- Work out how much of that activity you can comfortably do now, without feeling you are overdoing it - you can measure this in time, distance, or any unit of measurement you like. If walking for 20 minutes makes you feel really uncomfortable when you get home that's too much. If walking for 10 minutes feels ok, then start with 10 minutes for example. But go easy on yourself to begin and don't push yourself too much

- Set up an activity plan for your chosen activity - decide on how many days in the week you are going to do any activity, and write down how much of that activity you will do. Remember it is important to stay with the plan on both good and bad days.
- Act out the plan over a period of one week. Expect to feel worse to begin with, particularly if you are increasing activity. This is normal and doesn't indicate anything is wrong with your body. It is a normal response to increasing your activity and should not alarm you. Make sure you don't over do it on the good days. This is a common mistake people make
- Review the plan at the end of each week - sometimes your activity plan can be too ambitious and you can push things too much too quickly. If this is the case you may need to re-set your plan to make the following week a little easier. Conversely sometimes your activity plan is not ambitious enough and you find it very easy to reach your activity target; when this happens you need to increase your activity more the following week