Activity Cycling

A common pattern of activity for people with chronic pain is to go from doing a lot of activity to doing very little. **This is called activity cycling.**

There are many reasons for activity cycling but often attempts to continue to do things in the same way as before the onset of pain leads to swings from high to low levels of activity.

Most people with long-term pain learn to recognise when they are having a good day or a bad day. What often happens when someone has a good day is that they decide to ‘make the most of it’, or ‘catch up’ on things that need doing and have been putting off. So, on these days their level of activity goes up (see figure 1).

![Graph showing activity cycling]

**Figure 1**

People usually feel good about doing more. They are busy, have a sense of achievement, are probably more able to distract themselves from their pain, and feel generally better in themselves.

However, there is a drawback to this because most people find that following a ‘good day’ or a good few days when activity levels are higher than normal, there usually follows a ‘bad day’ or a few bad days (see figure 2). They end up ‘paying for it’. This usually means time when they can do little, if anything, and their pain is worse. More painkillers than usual may be taken. On the ‘bad
days’ people usually feel fed up and frustrated and generally miserable. Typically, the more pain someone is in the less active they are and the worse they feel in themselves.

All too often, people begin to have unhelpful negative thoughts, saying to themselves things like “I can't cope with this”, “whatever I do, I have pain so what’s the point?”, “I'm no good any more”, or “I'll never get any better”.

This can lead on to other unhelpful consequences such as:

1. An increasing feeling of having no control over pain.
2. Becoming discouraged about doing anything and eventually giving up doing most activities.
3. Increasing medication as a means of controlling pain.
4. Becoming depressed.

![Chart showing activity levels over time](Image)

**Figure 2**

So activity levels are reduced because pain is worse as a consequence of doing much more than usual. As pain reduces following a period of inactivity, the level of activity can increase again and the cycle is likely to start over once more.

A vicious circle of over activity and under activity can occur with pain controlling activity; in other words, going through peaks and troughs in terms of level of activity, pain and mood.
What can be done?

The answer is simple, but putting it into practice is not always easy! The most important thing is to remove the trough from this cycle, as for most people this is the worst time. Unfortunately, to do this means making a sacrifice at the peaks as well. So in Figure 3, to reduce the trough below the dotted Line 2 requires sacrificing the peak of activity above dotted Line 1.

![Figure 3](image)

The levels of activity should then fall between these two dotted lines. If the peaks of activity are reduced, the troughs that usually follow can also be prevented. This makes it easier to have regular and steady levels of activity across good and bad days, which is usually more desirable.

Swings in activity level can be prevented by regulating activity on a more consistent daily basis through proper use of:

1. Pacing
2. Prioritising
3. Planning

With pacing, prioritising and planning of activities, people may still experience good days and bad days, however if they can achieve a steadier level of
activity across both it is more helpful in terms of managing pain and can help them feel better in themselves.

There will be times, however, when someone knows that they have overdone an activity and will ‘pay for it’. This may be a choice they make. The price paid may be considered worthwhile in terms of pleasure or enjoyment they get from activity. What helps is that they are prepared for the consequences.

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