

# How to Manage Pain Flare-Ups Effectively

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Unfortunately pain flare-ups are a common experience for those with persistent pain. It's useful to know more about what they are, why they occur, and how to better manage them.

## What Are Flare-Ups and Why Do They Happen?

A normal part of ongoing pain, flare-ups are specifically random changes of pain. Sometimes it's hard to know what triggers a flare-up, especially because there are usually a number of factors involved. Sometimes you can prevent a flare-up, but other times you can't. However, there's always something you can do to get through.

## How Do Flare-Ups Happen?

Usually flare-ups happen when either pain changes **or** how well we deal with pain changes. Our sympathetic nervous system gets wound up and then the pain (and everything else) gets worse. It's useful to remember that there are four main factors involved in our experience of a flare-up:

- **Behavioural factors** – e.g. our actions, behaviours
- **Physiological factors** – e.g. biology, genetics, physical factors, our physiology
- **Emotional factors** – e.g. feelings, moods, emotions
- **Cognitive factors** – e.g. thoughts, beliefs, self-talk.

When you're managing a flare-up, you need to remember to address each of these four areas of your pain experience.

## What Can You Do When Flare-Ups Happen?

### 1. **Take action as early as possible.**

- Usually you can't stop a flare-up when it's already halfway there, but you might be able to shorten it or make it less intense. Taking charge of your flare-ups is powerful because it gives you back some control.

### 2. **Avoid 'high risk' situations.**

- Avoid situations where you find yourself having trouble dealing with your pain (you're tired or have to get something finished), increasing your pain when you don't really need to (pushing yourself too hard), or not using your usual coping strategies (pain has been good for a while, or there are unexpected event/demands).

### 3. **Watch for early warning signs.**

- Are you busier than normal? Coming down with a bug? Has there been change in your life? Try to notice the early warning signs of your body and think about what you can do differently in the moment.

### 4. **Take positive 'first steps'**

- The aim of 'first steps' is to give you some breathing space, so

you can think more clearly. Stop. Practice calming breathing by inhaling and tensing, then exhaling and relaxing. Remind yourself “I can cope with this; it’s only a flare-up. It will settle down.”

5. **Notice your thoughts and focus on coping statements.**
  - It can be really useful to create a ‘Can Cope Card’ for yourself like the one below, with coping statements that help you feel calm and that remind you to relax. Watch out for unhelpful thoughts or ‘catastrophizing’ (thinking the worst).
6. **Do something to change your physical situation**
  - Stretch, change position, change your task, slow down, take a walk, practice walking meditation, try massage, ice or heat.
7. **Focus on relaxation.**
  - Try to counteract the feelings of stress by focusing on relaxation techniques like breathing or meditation.
8. **Ask for help.**
  - You might need a distraction by hanging out with friends, or you might need practical help from a medical professional. Make sure you have more than one person you can contact. Keep their contact details on hand, and prepare the person – let them know what works for you and specifically what help you need.
9. **Distract yourself.**
  - Meeting up with a friend might not be possible, but there are other (healthy) ways to distract yourself to get through a flare-up. This won’t change the pain, but it can help you cope better. Focus on free, simple activities. For example, go for a gentle walk, re-read a book, watch a comedy, do a crossword, or play Angry Birds!
10. **Use your medication properly.**
  - The bad news is that available pain medications have their limitations; only one in four people will get a 50% reduction in pain. Although opioids relieve short-term pain, there is no evidence from randomized controlled studies indicating that they are effective in the long-term treatment of chronic pain. It’s okay to use analgesics for chronic pain, though, just as it is to use medications to lower high blood pressure. It’s up to you to decide to use analgesics as part of your pain self-management. If you do, it’s best to do a trial. You have weigh the good effects (e.g. pain relief, improved sleep) vs. the side effects and know that available analgesics are not very good. Remember that pain medication won’t take it all away, but it can help.

Finally, a great tip is to write these ten points down for yourself and keep it with you. Whenever you have a flare-up, run through these self-management techniques, and remember that it will pass.