

Pacing

A really useful skill for people who live
with persistent pain





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Produced by *Live Well with Pain*, a partnership of pain specialists and people with lived experience of pain.

Live Well with Pain produces a range of trusted self-management tools and resources for people with pain and the healthcare professionals who support them.

All resources are available free online at livewellwithpain.co.uk

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"I used to feel defeated by my pain. It completely controlled my life. But the skills I've learned through the Ten Footsteps programme mean I can actually start to enjoy life again. Thank you Live Well with Pain!"

Feedback from a person using the Live Well with Pain website

"Live Well with Pain is such a useful resource – I share it with patients every day!"

GP, Tyneside

People living with persistent pain find that pacing is one of the key everyday skills to learn and use. Pacing can help you achieve your goals without increasing your pain or letting tiredness force you to stop.

In this booklet you will find out what pacing means and discover new skills to help you balance activities through the day.

As you'll see, pacing is a bit like the story of the hare and the tortoise – slow and steady wins the race.



How can pacing help in managing persistent pain?

Pacing involves regulating your daily activity so as not to flare-up your pain. Pacing skills allow you to gradually increase what you are able to do so you become more active, fitter, healthier and happier.

Pacing is about choosing when to take a break from an activity – before pain, tiredness or other symptoms become too much. In other words, not carrying on until the pain itself or tiredness force you to stop.

Here are some of the positive changes that people with pain have told us they notice after they have learnt how to pace. Look through them, then tick the ones that you'd like to aim for, with the help of new pacing skills.

Doing more

People find they can do more, either by themselves or with family and friends. They can tick more things off their 'to-do' list.

More control

They feel they have more control over the pain and over their activity levels.

Less medication

They depend less on medicines and so they experience fewer unpleasant side effects.

Brighter moods, enjoy more

Life becomes more fun as they can do activities regularly with fewer setbacks.

Sleeping better

People who learn how to pace can sleep better at night.

More energy

They feel stronger and more energetic – they have more 'get up and go'.

Better social life

They can plan for a better social life and do more things with family and friends, knowing that their pain is more manageable.

Less pain

They find they have less pain and fewer flare-ups.

Setbacks don't last as long

When they do experience a setback – perhaps because of a flare-up of pain – it doesn't last as long.

Less effort

They feel less effort is required to achieve daily tasks and activities.

Good or bad pacing?

Whether we know it or not, we all do some kind of pacing – it just might not be the best kind for us.

Generally speaking, there are three unhelpful styles of pacing that people with persistent pain often use:

- **overactive pacing**
- **underactive pacing**
- **'boom and bust' pacing**

As you read about unhelpful pacing styles below, decide which pacing style you currently use:

Overactive pacing

This means doing too much activity or too many tasks over a short space of time.

Typically, this happens if you are having a good day, with less pain, or your mood is better: you try to do too much and end up with more pain and tiredness. This means you miss out on enjoyable things because you have to take time out to recover.

Underactive pacing

Underactive pacing means that you are doing too little activity to help keep up

your strength, stamina and flexibility in your muscles, ligaments, joints and bones.

Most of your time is spent resting, sitting or lying down, which is understandable. This leads to a decrease in fitness levels which in turn makes muscles and other tissues like ligaments stiffer, weaker and much more painful to move and use.

This pacing style can actually add to your pain, so over time you end up doing less and less because of the pain.

'Boom and bust' pacing

This is a mixed style of pacing, in which people swing between doing too much and too little.

With 'boom and bust' pacing, people use pain and energy levels as a guide to their activities and pacing them. This means they risk doing too much activity on good days (overactive), which makes their pain worse. They are then forced to rest while the pain settles down (underactive).

What's your pacing style?

Look at the three different styles of pacing described above. **Circle** the one that's closest to the way you pace at the moment.

Whether you feel that you tend towards being an overactive pacer,

an underactive pacer, or a 'boom and bust' type of pacer, then the good news is there's lots you can do to change your pacing style.

The rest of this booklet gives you some suggestions to try.

1. Activity Diary

To learn how to pace well, it's important to understand what your pacing style is now. A good way to do this is to track your activities with an Activity Diary, like the one opposite.

How to do it

Fill in the Activity Diary for at least two days. To do this you will need to:

- Fill in what you were doing and for how many minutes each time
- Write down when you took a break, sat down or lay down, and for how long
- Shade in the boxes for the hours when you were asleep

Top tip

You can draw your own Activity Diary on a piece of paper, using the example opposite as a guide.

Or you can download and print a ready-made one for free when you sign up at: livewellwithpain.co.uk

If you can't print it at home why not ask a healthcare professional to print it for you?



What to do next

When you have completed your Activity Diary, what do you notice about your pacing style? Use these questions to guide your thinking, and write down your answers:

How much activity did I do each day?

(in hours or minutes)

How much time did I spend resting, sitting or lying down each day?

(in hours or minutes)

How many hours was I asleep each day?

(in hours or minutes)

Did I manage to do the things I needed to do? If yes, which ones?

How much effort did my activities take on a scale of 0 to 10?

(0 = too easy; 10 = too hard)

What do your answers tell you about your current pacing style? Is it mainly:

- underactive
- overactive
- 'boom and bust'

My Activity Diary



Time of day	Activity	How long I did it for
8am	Shower Got dressed Made me and Anne some breakfast	10mins 5mins 20mins
9am	Washed the dishes and tidied the kitchen	25mins

2. Effort Scale

An effort scale is a good way to check whether an activity you are planning to do is going to be too much effort (leading to overactive pacing), too little effort (underactive pacing) – or just right.

How to do it

Decide the effort level of the activity you are planning to do.

Aim for an effort level of between 4 and 7 on the scale below.

A very low effort level means that things may not get done, or they will take ages, and you may get frustrated due to lack of progress. Too much effort and you may crash out with a setback again.

If you think the effort involved might be more or less than the 'balanced' zone of between 4 and 7, try altering your plans to do a little more or a little less.

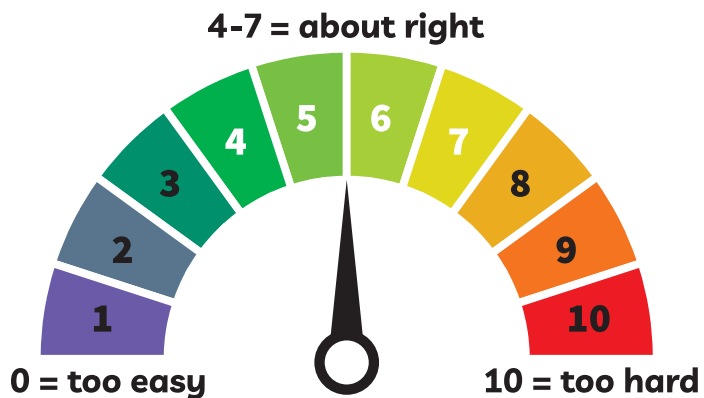
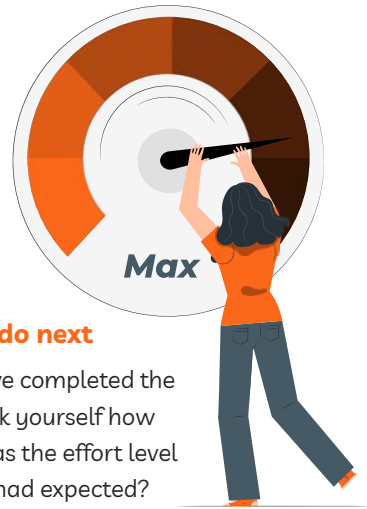
What to do next

After you've completed the activity, ask yourself how it went. Was the effort level what you had expected?

If the effort it took was 3 or less on the scale, experiment further – next time try doing it for longer and/or doing it faster.

If it turned out to be 8 or more, make sure next time to reduce it with more breaks and/or doing it for a shorter time.

Once you're doing things with an effort level of between 4 and 7, this is the balanced level of effort and you're most likely to succeed.



3. Daily Pacing Plan

When you've got used to rating the effort, you can create a Daily Pacing Plan to help you balance and pace your activities.

Balancing the body and mind together on activities helps do what you want to do. This will help control your pain and life with more success and less stress and move on in your life journey.

Top tip

You can draw your own Pacing Plan on a piece of paper, using the example below as a guide. Or you can download and print a ready-made one for free when you sign up at: livewellwithpain.co.uk

How to do it

Give pacing a go and start with a pacing plan and reward yourself for achieving a helpful habit for life.

Here are some ABC questions to help you build your Daily Pacing Plan:

- A: What activities can I pace today?**
- B: How long before I take a break?**
- C: Check the effort level on an Effort Scale (see previous page)**

My Daily Pacing Plan					
Activity	On a good day	On a bad day	On an average day	Number of times a day	Effort level (0-10)
Standing and cooking	10mins	5mins	7mins	4	6
Lying down for a rest	15mins	60mins	25mins	2	1

4. Balanced thinking

Good pacing also needs *balanced thinking* so you can balance the time spent on an activity with rest periods or breaks. This approach helps you keep up the activities which you value and are part of the goals that you want to achieve. It is a really tricky skill to learn and it won't happen straight away. But keep trying and you'll find it makes a positive difference to being more active, to your sleep and even to the pain itself.

To help develop balanced thinking, try to be aware of:



Thoughts like 'must' or 'should'

Replace these with 'could'. For example, instead of thinking 'I must get it all done today', try thinking 'I could choose to pace, and do it in stages over two or more days.'

Thinking that all the jobs must get done today

Watch for the unrealistic 'all or nothing' thinking styles that are not helpful. It is not giving in, except to pain!

"I was never any good at pacing before I had neck pain. I always pushed myself harder or longer to get things done. My early life probably made me that way, so it was difficult to change. Slowly I learnt with practice that not everything needs doing today. I took rest breaks in the garden or listening to my favourite music. It made a real difference. I am much less of a perfectionist, which actually makes me more reliable – and the family are pleased too!" *Arvind*

More useful tips for becoming a good pacer, from people with pain who have learnt to pace

Use a timer

Stop using pain and tiredness as your guide. Instead, why not try using a timer? For example, some people use a timer on their mobile phones or a kitchen timer so that the alarm goes off to tell them it's time for a break.

Prioritise and plan

Think about what needs doing today, tomorrow and next week. People with pain often realise that the way they think about activities is unhelpful. Thoughts like 'I must get this all done now' lead to an overactive pacing style. Rather than thinking 'This must be done within the next day or so', try thinking 'I might get all this done this week.' It is more realistic and possible!

Balance effort with reward

Making the rest period enjoyable means you are more likely to put in a break and look forward to it.

Set goals

Everything is achievable given the right tools and length of time to complete the task. Set short-term and long-term goals (Top tip: you can find out more about goal setting in *Ten Footsteps to Living Well with Pain*. It's footstep number 4).

Involve others

Let them know what you are doing and why, get them to lend a hand, have some fun and plan to give yourself – and them – a reward.

Summary

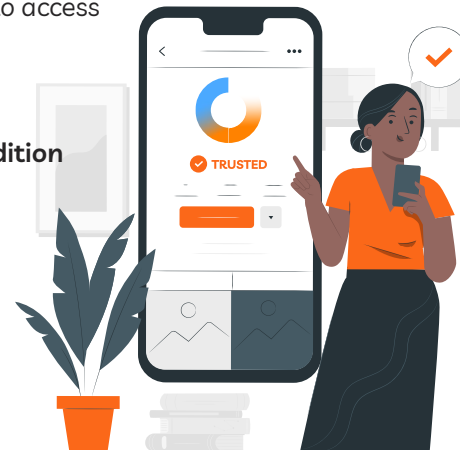
- Pacing is a key skill to improve all parts of your life. Identifying your pacing style and making changes helps you find ways to balance activities with breaks.
- If you are underactive, steadily pace yourself towards more activity. If you are overactive, plan more rest times and relaxation.
- Over time pacing can help you do and achieve more with fewer setbacks.
- Priorities are a vital part of pacing. Plan each day's activities around what is truly important to do in the time available.
- Explore the effort that you need to do your activities, using the effort scale as a guide. Adjust levels to ensure you pace in a balanced way.
- Use a Daily Pacing Plan to find a balance between activities and rest or relaxation breaks.



For more tips and ideas about how to self manage your persistent pain why not visit the *Live Well with Pain* website?

Live Well with Pain is dedicated to providing easy-to-use self management resources that are used and trusted by many thousands of people living with pain – and the clinicians who support them. Everything is free to access and the site covers topics like:

- understanding pain and the brain
- accepting pain as a long term condition
- setting goals for yourself – and achieving them
- learning how to pace yourself, so you can do more
- relaxation and mindfulness skills
- getting a good night's sleep
- relationships and pain
- pain medicines and their side effects
- planning for setbacks – and overcoming them



Visit [livewellwithpain.co.uk](https://www.livewellwithpain.co.uk)

and start your self management journey today.

