

ADVICE SHEET

Patient advice from Healthcare RM

Managing Setbacks

What are setbacks?

When we have a persistent pain problem, it is common for us to experience setbacks. A setback is usually characterised by a significant and sustained increase in symptoms.

- Setbacks can happen and they often have triggers
- There may be situations that make setbacks more likely
- If you can identify your triggers you can reduce the likelihood of a setback
- There is often a vicious circle that maintains the setback
- You might be able to break this vicious circle and manage these situations better
- You will then find that set backs are less problematic, you can manage them better, they don't last as long and you can get back on track sooner after having one.

How do I respond to a set back?

When symptoms become really bad it is difficult to do anything else but dwell on them - this is natural but it can get in the way of recovering quickly from a setback. How we respond to that increase in pain and what we think about it will often influence how quickly we recover from a flare-up.

If we think the worst when we experience a flare-up and reduce our activity levels it can often take a long time to recover. However, if we view setbacks as a normal part of a pain problem, and are reassured that it is safe to get moving, we often recover much quicker.

Remember that setbacks are usually time limited, so whilst you may need to reduce your activity for a short while, it is important to gradually increase activity in a short period of time.

Setback emergency plan

- Don't panic – this will get better
- Assess whether this is a new pain or your familiar one
- Try to relax and do some gentle exercises
- Take it slower for a few hours
- Keep active, but potter about
- Begin to pace your exercises up gradually
- Take some of your usual medication if necessary
- Keep in control. Don't seek further referral to a 'specialist'
- Try and work out why the setback happened
- Congratulate yourself afterwards for managing it well



Managing triggers

Initially there may be a trigger which causes a setback. We may have an excessively busy day which we weren't expecting, or we may forget to take our medication or we may receive some bad news about something. As a result of this our pain increases

There may be some triggers which we can control. These may include activities such as sustained sitting or prolonged driving. By taking regular breaks when doing these activities we can reduce the chances of experiencing setbacks. Other techniques to reduce the chances of setbacks happening include doing exercises, going for a walk, changing to another activity or relaxation

In spite of this there will be times when setbacks cannot be avoided. Setbacks are not always triggered by particular activities and not all triggered pain is controllable. However, by applying the techniques recommended in the emergency plan the impact of setbacks may be reduced.

Case study example

Mike has suffered with a back problem for 2 years. He can function quite well sometimes, but when he gets a flare-up it can knock him back for weeks. He has learnt the best way to control his pain when he gets a flare-up is to lie down and take some medication. However he often has to do this for several days and he has to cancel lots of social activities. He hasn't been able to maintain any employment recently because he kept on having to take time off.

Mike decided to set up a new plan to try the next time he had a flare-up. He decided, that no matter how bad he felt when he had a flare-up that he would try doing some gentle exercises and taking a short walk. He tried this, and found to his surprise that he was feeling much better by the end of the first day. Although it was difficult to get going initially, he found that using this strategy helped him to recover much quicker than normal. Mike has now learnt that using this approach helps him to recover from flare-ups much quicker. He has since returned to work and is able to keep going even when he has a flare-up.

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