

B7: Manage flare ups effectively

Flare ups and setbacks are terms often used interchangeably to refer to periods of increased pain. However, it may be helpful to differentiate between the two and consider flare ups as shorter - lasting up to 2 days, and setbacks as longer – lasting over 2 days and up several weeks.

FLARE UPS

When living with persistent pain it is quite normal to experience increased pain or flare up for a few hours or days, making it difficult to cope.

When this happens it is easy for worrying or negative thoughts to fill your mind such as “does this mean I am getting worse?” or “has there been further damage?”. This can result in doing unhelpful things such as going to bed for a long period or taking lots of extra tablets or sometimes carrying on with sheer frustration and making matters worse.

A good metaphor for a flare up is a storm.

Storms cannot be stopped; instead they must be weathered. The best approach is to seek shelter, prevent damage, survive and stay as comfortable as possible until the storm passes. When it ends, there can be a sense of relief.



1. Triggers

Although there may be times when there may not seem to be a reason for a flare up, it is helpful to try and identify causes or triggers so that where you are able to you can make changes to reduce the occurrence of flare ups.

If you are having difficulty identifying triggers, it can be helpful to keep an Activity and Pain Diary for a week or two. (You can use the ‘**Weekly Activity Diary**’ form or use the **Pain Tracker** and **Activity Tracker** on the secure patient section of our website – ask a member of staff for help if you need it in order to access this). Sometimes there may be a delay following certain activities or experiences before the flare up occurs; which may become more apparent when reviewing a diary

Common flare up triggers include:

- Having done too much
- Having stayed in a certain posture for too long
- Having done something new
- Using new or different furniture e.g. the bed at a hotel or friend’s house
- An acute illness
- An accident or other physical trauma
- Increased stress or anxiety
- Disruptions to your sleep – quality or pattern

Early warning signs

You may also be able to identify early warning signs or things that cause the triggers in the first place, e.g. not being able to say “no”, or the expectations of others causes you to overdo, or going on a long journey means you’re sat too long in one position.



Of course there may be times when you anticipate a flare up being triggered but you chose to go ahead with it, for e.g. attending a special family event. In these circumstances it is sensible to plan increased rest around this as well as other management strategies such as where you can use pacing approaches and communicating to others / asking for help to reduce the impact on pain levels. (Refer to the handout: '**Pain and Posture – Ideas for managing activities that cause pain**').

Using the '**Flare up Management Worksheet**', take time to identify your triggers, as well as early warning signs. Then consider how you can avoid common triggers or make plans to minimise or manage their effects.

2. Things that will help you be in control and reduce flare up affects

- **Check your thinking and challenge unhelpful thoughts:**
 - ❖ Increased pain does not necessarily mean damage.
 - ❖ Think: "**I've coped before, I will cope again**", "**I know this will settle in time**", "**Stay calm and relaxed. Tension isn't going to help**".
 - ❖ Try to **problem solve** how to cope with the stress of the flare up.
 - ❖ Don't worry about what other people think, or feel guilty about saying "no".
- Be **open and honest with family and friends:**
 - ❖ **Share your flare up management plan** with them beforehand.
 - ❖ Gain understanding and support from others as **guided by you**.
 - ❖ **Talk to family or friends** who are supportive and encouraging.
- Don't abandon your routine but scale things back a little:
 - ❖ Think of other ways to approach things and activities
 - ❖ **Prioritise** and **re-plan** your day, **ask** family, friends or work colleagues **for help** to fit your flare up plan around your day's priorities.
 - ❖ **Pace** yourself, be more careful than usual to **pace to time** and not to pain and take more **frequent breaks**.
 - ❖ Being flexible with yourself and others and your plans
- Use **distraction** and light activities
- Take special **care with your posture**. It is easier when the pain is worse for your posture to droop and this in turn will increase your pain.
- **Change positions**, alternate between sitting, standing, walking, lying and stretches.
- Use gentle exercise/stretching:
 - ❖ It can be useful to do **gentle stretches** the moment you feel increased pain coming on and to continue with exercises, but do not over do.
- Look after yourself and do things that help you to improve your mood and to relax.
 - ❖ Have some '**me time**' – use a flare up first aid box (see '**Flare up Management Worksheet**') – this can include alternative treatments or strategies such as heat or cold, having a bath, listening to music or watching a favourite film.
 - ❖ **Cold** or **heat** help relax muscle spasms (as a general rule use cold for no longer than 10 minutes and heat for no longer than 30 minutes).
- **Relaxation** – short but more frequent
 - ❖ Check for tension and use deep breathing to help reduce tension and relax muscles.



- Avoid being on maximum doses of **medication** all the time, so you are able to top up when in flare up
- Have some preparations made, like meals in the freezer

3. Flare up action plan

If a flare up occurs, having a **plan of action** ahead of time **will help** you get through these difficult times.

How an action plan will help with a flare up

- Your action plan may not necessarily reduce the intensity of the pain, but it **will help** you to be more in **control** until things go back to normal levels.
- The aim of the action plan is to help you cope better and to achieve your goals for the day through re-planning and using helpful techniques.
- Your action plan will include helpful and pleasant activities to prevent responding to stress in an unhealthy way, e.g. over eating or not moving.



Writing your action plan

It's useful to write a plan of action about what you would do during an episode of flare up.

Refer to the '**Flare up Management Worksheet**' to help you identify your triggers, what helps you manage flare ups, where your sources of support are and to write you Action Plan.

Review your plan after flare up goes to help decide "what went right, what have I learnt, what would I do differently next time?"

A flare up of pain which lasts for longer than two days is usually considered a **setback** and needs **increased planning** than a first aid plan.

Setbacks may happen for no clear reason or they may be due to something you have over done.

Review what may have led up to the **setback** as this could give you a guide to the best way of dealing with it.

At these times it may be more difficult to keep up with your activities and exercises.

Choices when standing at the crossroad

Remember you do have **choices** in the way you deal with your set back.

You could stop everything, start taking more pain killers or tranquillisers, tell yourself the pain management way hasn't worked, go to bed for as long as it lasts, call out the doctor and could set yourself up for a long period of increased pain.





On the other hand, you could **accept** that temporary set backs are bound to happen as part of a pain **condition**, so working out a plan of action well in advance and putting into practice when the setback occurs is a **new direction** worth trying.

Set back plan guidelines

- **Cut back** all tolerances to **activity** by half, including sitting, standing and walking time limits.
- **Cut** down all **exercises** by at least half but **continue** with **stretches**, although go more **gently**.
- Put **more relaxation** and short, **regular rests** into you day (don't over rest as you can stiffen up after 30 minutes).
- **Review** the activities you had planned and **prioritise** them. People have found writing a timetable for the coming week is helpful. **Ask** for extra **help**.
- If you decide to take extra medication, it is **important** to make a plan to **take** it **regularly** to set times so that you can **systematically reduce** over set back plan time, (usually a setback plan is 5-7 days).
- **Remember that pain medication can mask your current pain levels and lead to over doing.**
- Be extra kind to yourself, acknowledge this is a hard time, but **give yourself credit** for how you are coping. Give yourself **reward/reinforcement** for all your achievements, however small they may seem.
- **Check** your **thoughts** and feelings. Are they **helpful** and constructive and **not** slipping into **catastrophising** which is easy to do when faced with a setback.
- Make a **plan** to get back to your previous level of tolerance time to activity, (**pace** up within 5-7 days).
- **Remember**, make sure you have some **fun/enjoyable** activities **included** in your plan for this difficult time.
- When the setback is over, **review** how you dealt with it. **What** did you find **useful** about the way you coped? **Record** what went well and what you might change to be **helpful** for any future setbacks. Is there a way to help **prevent** some future setbacks?

References:

- *Coping with pain at its worst.* Health Psychology Service – February 2012. Derbyshire Community Health Services NHS Trust (<http://dchs.nhs.uk/health-psychology-useful-resources>) [Accessed 19-07-16]
- Sheffield Persistent Pain Service (www.sheffieldpersistentpain.com/persistent-pain/coping-with-persistent-pain/pacing-and-managing-flare-ups/flare-ups-or-setbacks) [Accessed 19-07-16]
- *Flare! The Princess in the Tower* – 2016 (<http://princessinthetower.org/flare/>) [Accessed 19-07-16]