



iflow Psychology

Information Sheet

Supporting mental health, resilience, and wellbeing

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A to Z Management of Pain:

Back Pain & Other Pain Conditions

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Pain management is often not about completely eliminating pain, but about implementing strategies to better manage it and optimise your quality of life. Below is an A–Z of strategies that can support you in living more fully with pain.

Acceptance

Chronic pain is difficult and often unfair, but it can also open space for growth. As we cultivate awareness and compassion for our own pain, we often become more understanding and compassionate towards others.

We all experience pain in some form, whether physical or emotional. Working towards acceptance of your pain (rather than constantly fighting or denying it) can help reduce anxiety, soften emotional distress, and reduce the tension that tends to magnify the perception of pain.

Acceptance does not mean liking your pain or giving up; it means acknowledging that it is present and choosing to focus on how best to live with it.

Breathing

Learn simple breathing techniques. Breathing is something we take for granted, but when used intentionally it becomes a powerful pain management tool. Focused and controlled breathing can:

- Help distract you from pain
- Optimise oxygen flow to your body
- Relax muscles
- Calm your nervous system and reduce physiological arousal

It can be done anywhere, at any time, and is a useful foundation for many other strategies such as mindfulness, relaxation, and sleep.

Complementary Medicine

In consultation with your treating doctor, some complementary therapies may be helpful alongside conventional treatment. These might include acupuncture, meditation, massage, certain supplements, vitamins, aromatherapy, or naturopathic approaches.

Key precautions:

- Make sure any practitioner is properly trained, qualified, and insured.
- “Natural” does not automatically mean “safe.” Some supplements and herbs can interact with prescribed medications or be harmful in certain medical conditions.
- Always inform your GP and pharmacist about any complementary treatments you are using.
- Be cautious of advertising that promises “miracle cures,” rapid fixes, or expensive “detox” or fad treatments without scientific evidence.
- Where possible, choose Australian-regulated products, as they are subject to stricter safety and quality standards.

Coping

People understandably turn to coping strategies to manage pain—including some that may be unhelpful over time, such as smoking, excess alcohol, overeating, or withdrawing from others.

These negative coping behaviours can worsen sleep, mood, and physical health, which then increases the overall experience of pain. Reducing or eliminating unhelpful coping behaviours and replacing them with healthier alternatives (exercise, relaxation, connection, structure, hobbies) can significantly improve quality of life.

A counselling psychologist can help you develop healthier coping mechanisms and gradually reduce unhelpful ones.

Counselling Psychologist

Psychological support is an important component of pain management. Seeing a counselling psychologist can help you:

- Understand the link between pain, mood, thoughts, and behaviour
- Learn strategies to reduce distress and catastrophising
- Build coping skills and resilience
- Work with grief, loss, and identity changes related to pain
- Seeking help is a sign of wisdom and strength, not weakness.

Distraction

It is natural to focus on pain, but sustained focus tends to magnify it. Distraction is a legitimate short-term pain management strategy. Shifting your attention to something meaningful, enjoyable, or engaging—such as conversation, music, puzzles, crafts, or TV—can reduce the intensity of pain in the moment.

Distraction is not “denial”; it is a deliberate choice to focus attention away from pain for periods of time. The more you practise, the better you become at shifting focus and

limiting the amount of time pain dominates your awareness.

Emotions

Living with persistent pain often brings a roller-coaster of emotions—frustration, sadness, anger, fear, and sometimes hopelessness. These emotions can also affect your relationships and how others respond to you.

Acknowledging your emotional responses (rather than suppressing them) and learning healthy ways to express and regulate them are vital. A psychologist can help you process these feelings and develop tools to manage them more effectively.

Environment

Your surroundings can either aggravate or ease pain and stress. Aim to create environments at home and work that are:

- Ergonomic (supportive chairs, desk height, bedding, etc.)
- Uncluttered and easy to move around in
- Pleasant to your senses (lighting, sound, scent, and textures)

Ask yourself:

Is my workspace or home comfortable? Is my chair supportive? Is the lighting harsh or too dim? Is there unnecessary noise or clutter that increases stress?

Small environmental changes (better chair, adjusted screen height, improved mattress, decluttering, softer lighting) can make a meaningful difference over time.

Fatigue

Persistent pain is physically and mentally tiring. Fatigue can make everyday activities feel overwhelming. Sleep disturbance, medication side effects, low mood, and deconditioning can all contribute to low energy.

Many strategies that help with pain also help with fatigue, such as:

- Pacing activities
- Gentle exercise
- Relaxation techniques
- Saying “no” when needed
- Healthy diet and hydration
- Reviewing medications with your doctor
- Optimising sleep routines

Flare-Ups

Most people with chronic pain experience flare-ups—periods where the pain becomes more intense or widespread. Flare-ups can feel discouraging, but they are usually temporary.

Sometimes triggers are obvious (overdoing physical activity, stress, poor sleep); other times they are less clear. Keeping a simple record of your pain levels, activities, and stresses can help identify patterns. Once probable triggers are identified, you can plan around them to reduce the frequency or severity of flares.

Having a flare-up plan (e.g., pacing, using heat/cold, medication as prescribed, rest, relaxation strategies) can reduce anxiety and increase your sense of control.

Goals

Goals give direction, structure, and meaning. They might relate to work, finances, holidays, relationships, health, or fitness. Realistic and well-planned goals can be highly motivating and remind you that your life is bigger than your pain.

A counselling psychologist can help you set appropriate DUMB (Dream, Uplifting, Measurable, Behaviour-based) and SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-framed) goals that take pain and energy levels into account.

Guided Imagery

Guided imagery is a relaxation and distraction technique that uses your imagination to focus on calming, safe, or pleasant scenes. This might be a favourite beach, forest, garden, or any place that feels tranquil and safe.

Listening to guided scripts or recordings can help reduce muscle tension, lower anxiety, and reduce the perceived intensity of pain for some people.

Healthy Eating

A well-balanced, nutritious diet supports overall health, mood, and energy. Good nutrition can:

- Optimise digestion and bowel health
- Support a healthy weight
- Reduce fatigue
- Boost immune function
- Help modulate inflammation
- Support mental health

Some conditions may be positively influenced by dietary changes. For example, inflammatory conditions like rheumatoid arthritis may benefit from increased intake of omega-3 fats (oily fish such as sardines and salmon). People with gout may benefit from limiting foods high in purines (e.g., offal, some shellfish, beer) and ensuring good hydration.

Always consult your GP or a dietitian before making significant dietary changes, especially if you have gastrointestinal or metabolic conditions (e.g., Crohn’s disease, coeliac disease, diverticulitis, diabetes).

Heat and Cold

Using heat or cold can be a simple, effective way to assist with pain management.

Heat may help relax tight or spasming muscles and ease stiffness.

Cold may help reduce swelling and numb the area, particularly after acute injury or flare-ups.

Avoid extreme temperatures and always protect your skin with a cloth or towel. Do not use heat on areas with reduced sensation or over active inflammation without medical advice.

Examples include:

- Heat:
 - Heat packs
 - Hot water bottles
 - Warm bath, shower, or spa
 - Heat patches or rubs
 - Electric blankets or heated throws (used with care)
- Cold:
 - Reusable gel cold packs
 - Bags of frozen peas or other frozen food (wrapped)
 - Cold gels
 - Ice packs (wrapped, not directly on skin)

A physiotherapist can provide tailored advice on when and how to use heat and cold most effectively.

Help

There will be times when you need extra support. This might involve help with household tasks, transport to appointments, or assistance with shopping.

Asking for help is sensible, not weak. Most people are willing to help if they understand what you need. Investigate local support services, community health centres, council services, and, where relevant, schemes such as NDIS or My Aged Care.

Hydration

More than half of the human body is water.

Adequate hydration:

- Supports joint lubrication
- Aids digestion and prevents constipation
- Helps regulate temperature and blood pressure
- Supports concentration and energy

Fluid needs vary depending on age, gender, health conditions, medications, and environment. As a general rule, drink regularly throughout the day and increase fluids in hot weather or when physically active. Don't rely solely on feeling thirsty as a cue.

Alcohol and caffeine-containing drinks (coffee, many teas, cola, energy drinks) have diuretic effects in some people, so they should not be your primary source of fluid.

Information

Knowledge is power. Understanding your diagnosis, treatment options, and the nature of chronic pain can reduce fear, uncertainty, and unhelpful assumptions ("It must be getting worse," "I'll end up in a wheelchair," etc.).

Seek information from:

- Your treating health professionals
- Evidence-based websites (e.g., government, university, or reputable health organisations)
- Recognised peak bodies (e.g., Arthritis Australia, pain foundations)

Be cautious about social media anecdotes, unverified blogs, or "Dr Google" opinions presented without evidence.

Journaling

Keeping a simple record can be very helpful. You might track:

- Pain levels
- Activities and pacing
- Sleep
- Mood and stress
- Medications and other strategies
- Food or other triggers

This can help you and your treatment team identify patterns, triggers, and the impact of different strategies. A notebook or an app (sometimes linked with devices like Fitbits) can make tracking easier.

Keep Connected

Pain often pushes people towards isolation. You may worry that activities will worsen pain, or that you can't participate like you used to. On difficult days, withdrawing can feel easier—but over time isolation typically worsens mood, stress, and even the perception of pain.

Staying connected has strong protective benefits. Aim to maintain:

- Contact with family and friends
- Social or hobby groups
- Work or volunteering where possible
- Pleasant outings or activities that are meaningful to you

These are not “extras”; they are important parts of sustaining wellbeing and keeping pain in perspective.

Laughter

When you are in pain, laughter may feel far away—but it can be surprisingly therapeutic. Laughter triggers the release of “feel-good” neurotransmitters such as endorphins, serotonin, and dopamine, which can improve mood and reduce the perception of pain. Endorphins act as natural pain modulators.

Laughter can also support immunity and resilience. Try watching a comedy, listening to a funny podcast, sharing jokes with friends, or following humour you enjoy.

Massage

Massage involves working with the soft tissues of the body to ease tension and promote relaxation. For some people, massage can:

- Improve blood circulation
- Reduce muscle tightness
- Temporarily reduce pain
- Aid sleep and stress relief

You may use self-massage, tools such as foam rollers or massage balls, or seek a qualified remedial massage therapist or physiotherapist. People with certain conditions (e.g., fractures, severe osteoporosis, some vascular conditions) should seek medical advice before deep or vigorous massage.

Medications for Pain Management

There are several groups of medications that may be used as part of pain management. They should always be individualised, reviewed regularly, and used under medical supervision.

Over-the-counter medications

These include paracetamol and some non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) like ibuprofen or low-dose aspirin. They may help mild to moderate pain. All medications have potential side effects and risks; “over-the-counter” does not mean “risk-free.” Always follow dosing instructions and check with your pharmacist or doctor, especially if you are taking multiple products.

Prescription medications

Higher-dose NSAIDs and other analgesics are available on prescription. NSAIDs may help pain associated with inflammation and can reduce fever but can have side effects on the stomach, kidneys, and cardiovascular system, particularly with long-term use.

Opioids

Opioids may be prescribed for acute severe pain (e.g., post-operative) or some cancer-related pain. For long-term non-cancer pain, the benefits are often limited, and risks can be significant (dependence, tolerance, constipation, hormonal effects, respiratory depression). Opioid use must be carefully monitored and, in many cases, minimised or avoided where other strategies are effective.

Medications for neuropathic pain

Certain antidepressants, anti-epileptic drugs, and some other medications can help with nerve-related pain or sensitised pain pathways. They can have notable side effects (e.g., drowsiness, weight changes, cognitive slowing) but can be helpful in selected cases.

Always discuss your medication plan with your doctor and pharmacist, and avoid taking multiple products containing the same active ingredient (e.g., more than one product containing paracetamol) unintentionally.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness involves paying purposeful attention to the present moment with openness and acceptance. When applied to pain, mindfulness does not “erase” pain, but it can:

- Reduce the emotional suffering wrapped around pain
- Improve coping
- Decrease stress and anxiety
- Improve sleep and mood

Regular practice—formal (e.g., meditation) or informal (e.g., mindful walking, eating)—can help you respond to pain with greater calm and flexibility rather than reflexive distress.

Nutrition

Eating a varied, balanced diet supports energy, immunity, mood, and tissue repair. Pain, fatigue, and low mood can sometimes lead to skipped meals, reliance on takeaway food, or limited food choices, which can worsen health over time.

Practical suggestions:

- Seek advice from a dietitian if you are unsure how to eat well within your energy limits.
- Prepare extra meals on better days and freeze them for days when pain is worse.
- Aim for colourful meals (fruits and vegetables of different colours) to increase beneficial nutrients.
- Maintain weight within a healthy range. Excess body weight increases load on weight-bearing joints such as hips, knees, and spine.
- Avoid extreme, fad, or celebrity diets.

Focus on sustainable, evidence-based eating patterns.

Ointments, Creams, Sprays, Liniments, Rubs & Gels

Topical preparations (creams, gels, sprays, ointments) can provide local, temporary pain relief for some people. They commonly contain:

- Counter-irritants (e.g., menthol, methyl salicylate, eucalyptus, camphor) that create warmth or cooling sensations which distract from pain.
- Topical NSAIDs for local anti-inflammatory effect.

Topical products still carry some risk, particularly if you already use oral NSAIDs or have allergies or skin conditions. Always read labels and check with your pharmacist or GP if you are unsure.

Pacing

Pacing is a core principle in chronic pain management. It means balancing activity and rest, and breaking tasks into manageable chunks so you stay as active as possible without provoking major flares.

Rather than doing very little on bad days and overdoing it on good days (the “boom–bust” cycle), pacing aims to create a more consistent pattern of activity. For example, mowing the front lawn one day and the back lawn another day, instead of doing all of it at once and then needing days to recover.

Pacing applies to physical and cognitive tasks and is a skill that can be learned and refined.

Physical and Occupational Therapy

Physiotherapists and occupational therapists play a key role in pain management.

Physiotherapists can guide you through exercises to maintain or improve strength, mobility, and flexibility, and can advise on safe activity levels.

Occupational therapists can help you modify activities and environments so you can perform daily tasks (work, self-care, leisure) with less strain and pain.

Both can help you build confidence to move safely again.

Planning

Planning your day or week helps you use your limited energy in a way that reflects your priorities. This might include:

- Breaking large tasks into smaller steps

- Scheduling demanding tasks for times of day when you typically feel better
- Including rest periods and lighter tasks between more demanding ones
- Planning enjoyable activities, not just chores and obligations

Plans should be flexible, not rigid. Work with your healthcare team to set realistic plans and adjust them as needed.

Posture

Posture refers to how your body is aligned when you sit, stand, and move. Good posture spreads load across structures more evenly and reduces strain.

Poor posture (e.g., prolonged slumping over a laptop, awkward work setups, unsupportive mattresses) can contribute to pain or aggravate existing problems. Reviewing your posture and the way your environment is set up (desk, chair, car seat, bed, pillows, screens) can prevent ongoing strain.

Sometimes, correcting the underlying ergonomic cause does more for long-term improvement than repeated treatment alone.

Prioritise

When energy and pain levels are limited, you cannot realistically do everything.

Prioritising means deciding:

- What must be done today?
- What can be postponed?
- What can be simplified?
- What can be delegated or shared?

Over time, you can gradually increase activities as stamina improves.

Understanding your limits and working with them (rather than against them) supports better pain and fatigue management.

Problem-Solving

Chronic pain adds extra obstacles to daily life, but many of these can be addressed with structured problem-solving:

- Identify the specific problem (e.g., difficulty shopping, housework, childcare).
- Brainstorm possible solutions (e.g., online grocery delivery, hiring help, rotating chores within the family).
- Test a solution and review how it went.

This active, solution-focused approach can reduce feelings of helplessness and make tasks more manageable.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR)

PMR is a structured technique that involves tensing and then relaxing muscle groups in sequence. This helps you distinguish between tension and relaxation and can reduce muscle tightness that either contributes to or results from pain.

PMR can also support sleep and anxiety management. It should be used with appropriate clinical precautions (as per your earlier sheet). A counselling psychologist or trained clinician can teach you PMR safely and effectively.

Quit Smoking

Smoking is harmful to nearly every system in the body and is associated with increased risk of chronic pain conditions (including back and neck pain) and slower healing. It can reduce circulation, impair bone and tissue repair, and reduce the effectiveness of some medications.

Quitting smoking improves energy, lung function, circulation, and overall health, which in turn can support engagement in exercise and daily activities. Seek help from your GP, Quitline, or other structured programs—success rates are higher with support.

Reduce

“Reduce” here refers to modifying, not completely stopping, activity. It can be sensible to temporarily reduce or adapt activities during flares, but avoiding activity until you feel “100%” usually leads to deconditioning and more pain in the long run.

Small, gradual increases in movement and activity—guided by pacing and professional advice—allow you to stay engaged in life and maintain strength, roles, and identity.

Relaxation

Relaxation techniques (such as diaphragmatic breathing, PMR, guided imagery, or gentle stretching) can reduce muscle tension and calm the nervous system. Because pain and stress feed off each other, reducing stress and muscle tightness can lessen the intensity of pain for some people.

Relaxation is a skill that improves with practice. Using it regularly—not only during crises—helps build a calmer baseline.

Stress Management

Chronic pain and stress often form a vicious cycle. Pain increases stress; stress heightens pain sensitivity. Learning to manage stress can therefore be a powerful way to reduce overall pain burden.

Stress management may include:

- Relaxation and mindfulness
- Boundaries and pacing
- Problem-solving
- Counselling or psychotherapy
- Time in nature and restorative activities

A counselling psychologist can help you identify your stress triggers and build a personalised stress management plan.

Support

Strong social support is one of the most robust predictors of better coping with chronic pain. Feeling understood and supported by family, friends, peers, and health professionals can reduce distress and improve outcomes.

Support may include:

- Emotional support (listening, empathy)
- Practical assistance (tasks, transport)
- Peer support (others who live with pain)
- Online or in-person support groups

Avoid withdrawing completely; isolation tends to worsen both mood and pain.

Teamwork

Effective pain management is usually multidisciplinary. This means a “team” that may include:

- General practitioner (GP)
- Pain specialist
- Physiotherapist
- Psychologist or counsellor
- Occupational therapist
- Pharmacist
- Dietitian
- Other allied health professionals

Make sure your health professionals are properly qualified and registered (e.g., with AHPRA where applicable). Good communication within the team—and with you at the centre—is critical.

Understand

Understanding your condition, your treatments, and how pain works helps reduce fear, clarify expectations, and strengthen your sense of agency.

Ask questions like:

- What is my diagnosis?
- What can I realistically expect from treatment?
- What can I do myself that will make a difference?

The more accurately you understand your pain, the less room there is for catastrophic assumptions, and the more confidently you can engage in self-management.

Visualisation

Visualisation is similar to guided imagery but more self-directed. You create your own mental images and scenes that evoke calm, strength, or soothing sensations. For example, you might imagine warmth and comfort flowing into painful areas, or yourself engaging in meaningful, valued activities.

Visualisation won't “switch off” pain entirely, but it can reduce distress, improve coping during flares, and assist with relaxation and sleep.

Weight Management

Maintaining a healthy weight supports joint health, mobility, cardiovascular fitness, and energy. Pain can lead to less movement and increased comfort eating, which can contribute to weight gain and deconditioning, further increasing pain and injury risk.

Being underweight can also be problematic, especially if appetite is reduced due to pain or medication. Inadequate nutrition can impair healing, immunity, and energy.

Aim for gradual, sustainable weight changes guided by your GP or dietitian. Avoid extreme diets and focus on long-term, healthy eating patterns and gentle, regular movement.

Exercise (Exercise)

Exercise does not need to be intense to be beneficial. In fact, for chronic pain, gentle, regular, paced activity is usually best.

Benefits include:

- Release of endorphins, which can reduce the perception of pain
- Improved strength, flexibility, and joint stability
- Better mood, sleep, and energy
- Reduced risk of other health problems (e.g., diabetes, cardiovascular disease)

Aim for a mix of:

- Flexibility exercises: gentle stretching and range-of-movement work
- Strengthening exercises: to support joints and daily function
- Cardiovascular (aerobic) exercises: such as walking, swimming, cycling

Start small and increase slowly. Choose activities you enjoy and, where possible, exercise with others for social support and accountability. Always discuss new programs with your doctor or physiotherapist, especially if you have other health conditions.

Your Inner Voice

Your internal dialogue (self-talk) has a powerful influence on mood and pain. Persistent negative thoughts such as “I can’t cope,” “My life is over,” or “I’m useless now” can increase distress and amplify pain.

Becoming aware of these thoughts—and learning to respond with more balanced, compassionate, and realistic alternatives—can improve mood, self-esteem, and pain coping. Mindfulness, cognitive-behavioural strategies, and gratitude practices can all help shift your inner voice from harsh criticism to supportive encouragement.

Zzzzzz... Sleep

Pain and sleep have a two-way relationship. Pain can make it harder to fall or stay asleep; poor sleep increases pain sensitivity, irritability, and fatigue.

Good sleep hygiene may include:

- Keeping a regular sleep–wake schedule
- Limiting caffeine and alcohol later in the day
- Creating a calm, dark, comfortable sleep environment
- Using relaxation techniques before bed
- Avoiding long daytime naps if you struggle to sleep at night

Discuss sleep difficulties with your counselling psychologist or GP; improving sleep can have a significant positive impact on pain, mood, and daily functioning.
