

Pain Management Strategies

Compiled by: Drs. Chelsea da Estrela & Meghan Schinkel, Registered Psychologists
IWK Pediatric Complex Pain Management Team
Last updated: December 2022

A few notes about this handout: This resource is not meant to be an exhaustive list of strategies, but rather some strategies to help get you started in managing your pain. **When pain is the syndrome and not only a symptom of a disease, the first step to improving your functioning or pain is using your pain management skills.**

The following are a collection of strategies that you can try and come back to depending on your current needs and goals. You might find that some strategies work in certain situations or moments in your life and others are more helpful at other times. This is completely normal. **One thing to keep in mind is that these strategies require practice before they are helpful.** It is always easier to practice strategies when you are not in crisis or in a pain flare so that these strategies are ready to use when you need them.

You may also notice that a lot of the resources recommended in this handout are geared towards managing your mental health, this is not because we think that challenges with mental health cause pain or that pain is “all in your head”. Your pain is absolutely real. It is simply because the same strategies that we can use to improve our mental health and well-being also happen to help with pain management.



Coping with your baseline pain and maintaining your well-being

These strategies are helpful in preventing pain flares and maintaining overall physical and psychological well-being. At first, it may take a lot of effort and intention to use these strategies, but with practice you will notice that these strategies will become a habit (you might not even notice you're using them!). Chronic pain can fluctuate over time so these strategies are especially helpful to come back to and practice if you find yourself in a period of increased pain, change, or stress.

Strategy: Relaxation Strategies



How does it work? Relaxation or calming strategies are designed to turn on our parasympathetic nervous system (rest & digest system) and strengthen our natural analgesic system. Relaxation strategies can also help people cope with stress and we know that youth with chronic pain conditions are more likely to experience stress than other youth.

With practice, some youth notice a decrease in muscle tension and stress after doing a relaxation exercise. However, even if you do not notice an immediate reduction in tension, stress, or pain, relaxation strategies still have long-term benefits that might be more difficult to notice in the moment.

Examples:

Active/progressive muscle relaxation: Squeeze/tense different body parts or your whole body for 5 seconds and then release for 7 seconds. Notice the difference between tension and relaxation, and repeat as many times as desired.

Mental vacation/imagery: Pick a place that you can feel calm or happy, this can be a real place, one that you've been to or that one day you'd like to go to, or a completely made up and imaginary place. Think about what you can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste.

Deep breathing: Breathe in through your nose as though you're smelling a flower and out through your mouth as though you're blowing out birthday candles. Try to make your exhales longer than your inhales, and hold your breath in between. Focus on your belly, and not your chest, filling up with air as you inhale and deflate as you exhale. You can trace your fingers up and down, or an imaginary square or infinity sign to help you pace your breathing.

Tips: Relaxation is different from “relaxing”. There are many activities that people find relaxing in that they provide comfort and are calming. Relaxation refers to a specific set of strategies that are designed to turn on our rest and digest system.

Resources: Download MindShift app (<https://www.anxietycanada.com/resources/mindshift-cbt/>) to access free relaxation recordings (Tools > Chill Zone). www.thecomfortability.com also has a link to free pain-specific relaxation exercises (Guided Exercises > Relaxation).

Strategy: Activity Pacing

How does it work? Youth with chronic pain often experience a decrease in activity because it hurts to do things so you stop doing them. In the long run, this makes it harder to get back to the things that are important to you. Pacing includes structuring your activities in a way that prevents you from overdoing the activity and worsening your pain by incorporating rest periods. You can pace physical, social, or mental activities.



Example:

Create your own activity pacing plan using the following steps:

1. Select any activity you wish to pace
2. Estimate how long you can tolerate the activity – how much time can you be doing it before you start to feel worse?

3. Estimate a rest period – how long do you need to rest from this period of activity?
4. Alternate the two time periods: activity – rest – activity – rest
5. Increase your activity gradually; after 2-3 days where your pain doesn't worsen and keep the rest the same
6. Repeat step 5 every 2-3 days as long as pain doesn't flare

Tips: Do not exceed your set time on “good” pain days and try to stick with your plan even on “bad” pain days. Of course, if there is an activity that is really important to you but involves more activity than you've built up to, it is completely okay to choose to still do it even if you know it may result in a pain flare.

Resources: Link to video on how to activity pace and to learn more about the principles of activity pacing:
<https://mycarepath.ca/managing-pain/paced-practiced-and-increasing-activities>

Strategy: Behavioural Activation

How does it work? Engaging in pleasurable activities might sound like a silly or unimportant strategy, but it is actually very important in the treatment of chronic pain (and in promoting anyone's general sense of well-being!). It is particularly important in the management of chronic pain because it increases your level of physical activity, improves your sleep drive during the day, and maximizes your opportunities for positive experiences, which can help improve your mood and lower feelings of stress – which we know also increases the experience of pain.

Example:

Pleasant activity scheduling: Make a conscious effort to schedule and engage in pleasant activities on a daily basis. Even if you typically do these things anyways, doing them “on purpose” to “feel better” makes them a more powerful strategy.



Tips: Improvements in mood and motivation often happen after activity and not before, so try not to wait to feel better before doing something pleasant as it usually works the other way around!

Strategy: Navigating problems and stressors



How does it work? Problems and stressors are a normal part of life, however, youth with chronic pain conditions usually encounter more problems and stressors than other youth. Problems and stressors can pile up and increase stress, which can make it harder to deal with pain. Learning how to navigate problems and multiple demands can be an important skill for youth with chronic pain conditions to learn.

Examples:

Four-Step Approach to Problem Solving: Problem solving is what we do to fix a current problem and/or prevent the problem from getting bigger or happening again in the future.

Step 1: Define the problem using specific and concrete language that is both realistic and achievable. Ex. “I want to spend more time with friends” is too general and can be changed to “In 3 months, I want to be able to go to the mall for 1 hour a week with my friends”.

Step 2: Generate at least 10-15 solutions with judging your ideas. Write everything and anything that comes to mind.

Step 3: Weigh the pros and cons of your different solutions. Cross out solutions that are too demanding, rely too much on others, or are too harmful.

Step 4: Pick a solution and create an action plan (when and how will you implement your solution), then review whether or not your solution worked.

Task List: Create a task list – just one – take it everywhere you go and write down the things you need to do. Refer to it at least once a day to stay on track.

Task Prioritization: Prioritize your task list using the ABC system – label tasks as “A” if they need to be done today or tomorrow, “B” more than a few days, “C” if task is attractive but unimportant.

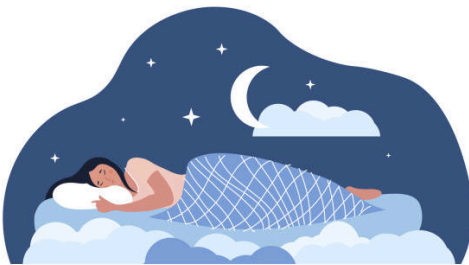
Tips:

Troubleshooting obstacles to problem solving:

1. If you are too upset to effectively solve a problem exit the situation or calm yourself down before attempting to solve the problem
2. If deeper issues pop up that can't be easily fixed you might need to use other techniques, such as acceptance or managing difficult emotions, to cope with a problem.
3. If solving a problem carries more costs than the problem itself, sometimes it can be in our best interest to choose to simply accept the situation and focus on more important issues

Resources: It can be challenging to keep track of new habits you're trying to set or multiple demands. Using a habit tracker apps (such as: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/habit-tracker/id1438388363>) and alarms/reminders in your phone can be a helpful way of meeting your goals and making changes.

Strategy: Managing your Sleep



How does it work? The relationship between sleep and pain can go both ways; pain can make it harder to fall and stay asleep, and poor sleep can make it harder to cope with pain the next day. Improving your sleep is one lifestyle factor that you can change to improve your pain management. Good sleep also has benefits for broader stress and mood management.

Examples:

General sleep hygiene recommendations: Try to keep electronics out of the bedroom as this can interfere with noticing our sleepy cues. Try to avoid caffeinated drinks and foods at least 8 hours before bed. Avoid strenuous activity right before bed.

Building your sleep drive:

- Schedule and follow a consistent bedtime and wake up time based on how many hours (not too much or too little!) you need to feel refreshed.
- No weekend catch-up: try not to vary your sleep schedule by more than 1-2 hours on the weekend and holidays
- Avoid naps: if you are really sleepy or don't feel well, keep your naps short (<30 minutes) and in the early afternoon

Retraining the bed-sleep connection:

- Make your bed, and ideally your room, a sleep-only zone: Only use your bed for sleeping
- Only go to bed when you're sleepy after your set bedtime
- If you can't fall asleep or stay asleep get out of bed! Complete a quiet but boring activity somewhere else in your room. Repeat as many times as necessary

Tips: If you've struggled with sleep for several months, you may need to implement these strategies in a fairly strict way for at least two weeks before you notice improvements. It is not uncommon for people to feel more sleep deprived when they are first trying out these strategies. If you're worried about increased sleep deprivation, you can try these strategies when you know you have a lighter load at school or at home. If you have a history of psychosis or mania, please only follow these recommendations under supervision of a healthcare professional as sleep deprivation can increase psychotic and manic symptoms for those at risk.

Resources:

Guided sleep relaxation recording:

https://www.mcgill.ca/wellness-hub/files/wellness-hub/guided_relaxation_to_sleep_0_0.mp3

CBT-I Coach app: App that can be used to create a structured sleep action plan
<https://apps.apple.com/ca/app/cbt-i-coach/id655918660>

Strategy: Managing Challenging Emotions

How does it work? Challenging emotions do not cause pain, however, they can be a consequence of having to deal with pain for a long time and can make it harder to cope with pain. Challenging emotions can also make it harder to do the things you know can help your pain. Managing your emotions is a way of both directly and indirectly improving your pain management.

Examples:

Recognize and label what emotions you're feeling: Ask yourself the following four questions

1. Is this feeling giving me an overall positive or negative sensation? Do I want more or less of it?
2. If this feeling had words, what would it say?
3. What do you want to do? What actions do you feel like taking?
4. What past experiences does it remind you of?

Self-validation: Recognize that your emotions make sense. This is important because sometimes we end up feeling bad about feeling bad.

Opposite action: Every emotion has an action urge, which is normal and can serve important purposes. However, if you think our emotions don't fit the facts or is too intense and won't be helpful, you can try opposite action by following these steps:

1. Figure out the emotion you are feeling.
2. What is the action urge that goes with that emotion?



3. Ask yourself: does the emotion fit the facts (not my impressions) of the situation?
4. If yes, ask: Will acting on the urge of the emotion be effective?
5. Ask yourself: Do I want to change the emotion?
6. If yes, figure out the opposite action.
7. Do the opposite action- all the way! (opposite behaviour, words and thinking, and facial expression, tone of voice, and posture)
8. Continue doing the opposite action until the emotion goes down enough for you to notice.

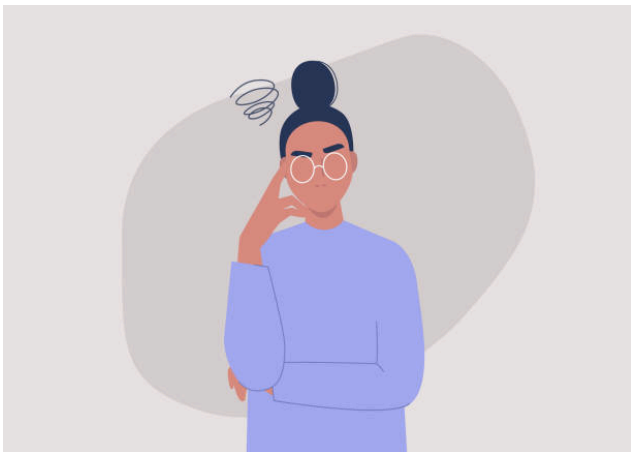
Coping cards/statements: Coping cards are cards with mantras, quotes, or sentences that can help you cope in the moment when you're struggling.

Resources: Links to examples that you can use to create your own cards:

<https://www.conncoll.edu/media/new-media/student-experience-section/AffirmationsCopingStatements.pdf>

https://opi.mt.gov/Portals/182/Page%20Files/Suicide%20Prevention/Documents/Coping%20cards%20on%20ring_for%20print.pdf

Strategy: Challenging unhelpful thoughts



How does it work? How we feel and act in a given situation has more to do with how we perceive and make sense of facts (our thoughts) than the actual and objective facts of that situation. Thoughts can be changed with practice.

Example:

Ask yourself the following questions to start challenging unhelpful thoughts:

- Have I had any experiences or is there any information that suggests that this thought is not completely true all the time?
- If my best friends or someone I loved had this thought, what would I tell them?
- If my best friend or someone who cares about me knew what I was thinking, what would they say to me?
- What factual evidence (information or experiences) would they point out to me that suggest that my thought is not 100% true?
- Are there any small pieces of information that contradict my thought that I might be ignoring or discounting as not important?
- Are there any strengths or qualities that I have that I am ignoring? Is there any information that suggests there might be a positive outcome in this situation?
- Five years from now, if I look back at this situation, will I look at it any differently? Will I focus on any different part of my experience?

Tip: Changing or challenging thoughts sometimes requires actively gathering more information before we can make decisions about the accuracy or helpfulness of our thoughts. The goal is not to necessarily become a more positive thinker, but more of a realistic one.

Resources: Apps that can help you challenge the way you're thinking in the moment:

Woebot: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/woebot-your-self-care-expert/id1305375832>

MindShift: <https://www.anxietycanada.com/resources/mindshift-cbt/>

Strategy: Reset with mindfulness

How does it work? Mindfulness refers to shifting our attention from being stuck inside our minds and our bodies, and into the present moment. It is an approach that allows us to let go of what we are struggling with and focus on what is happening in the present. Mindfulness can be used in our everyday lives to help us make decisions that are aligned with our values and can help us refocus our attention when we feel like we are struggling.

Mindfulness can be practiced both formally and informally. By practicing mindfulness, we learn to be able to “catch” when our mind wanders and how to bring it back to what is actually happening around us. You can then use this skill in the moment when you notice your mind wandering to pain or other symptoms.

Example:

Mindfulness during our daily routine: Pick an activity that you would be doing anyways (e.g., brushing your teeth) and totally focus on what you’re doing (what you can see, smell, touch, taste, and hear). Your attention will wander. When you notice your attention wander, gently acknowledge it, and bring it back to the activity.



Tip: The goal of mindfulness is not to reduce symptoms, but is instead about reducing our suffering by not letting our symptoms get in the way of our decisions.

Resources: *Smiling Mind* app has a number of recordings that you can use to practice mindfulness and use mindfulness in the moment when you need it:
<https://www.smilingmind.com.au/smiling-mind-app> More information on mindfulness and guided mindfulness exercises can be found on *Breathr*
<https://www.keltymentalhealth.ca/breathr>

Strategy: Learning to accept what we cannot change and moving forward anyways

How does it work? When we *can* do something to solve a problem, solving that problem is generally of benefit to us. But sometimes, the problems we have cannot be readily solved (e.g., having difficulty completing a full gym class – this is a problem that can eventually be solved through activity pacing, physical reconditioning and other pain management techniques but will not be resolved immediately), or can be solved, but are outside of our control (e.g., having to wait several weeks for a

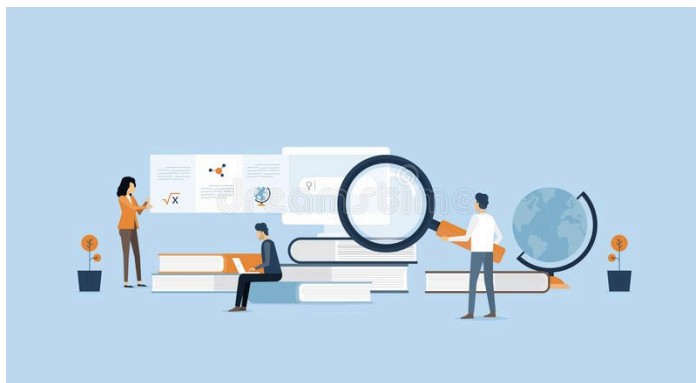
medical procedure or appointment). Sometimes, we might experience life circumstances that are very difficult to endure. In these cases, practicing acceptance can help us cope and feel better.

Acceptance involves seeing reality as it is (even if we don't like it!), recognizing what things you can and cannot change, and letting go of situations that are outside of your control. It does not mean that you like the situation or that you are giving up – it just means choosing to stop struggling with it (for now!).

Examples:

Put our thoughts and emotions into perspective by thinking about the larger picture – what are the benefits of accepting this rather than struggling? Are you missing out on other important parts of your life because you are spending energy on this problem? If you can accept the parts that distress you, how would your life be different? Would you be able to enjoy or appreciate the rest of your experience more easily? (For example, maybe you're not able to complete a full gym class today but you acknowledge that that is a goal that you are working towards, that there are different aspects of gym class that you can engage in – accepting the parts that you cannot do right now and appreciating the parts that you can).

Connect your acceptance of emotions or events to values that are important to you – is engaging with your distress preventing you from reaching your goals or living in line with values that are important to you? (For example, if you value being active think about other ways you can be active, think of ways you can increase your level of activity instead of focusing on the distress that comes with not being able to be as physically active as you would like to be right now.) Are there some goals or values that are more meaningful to you than avoiding distress? Think about how important that goal or value is to you and how you can move towards it.



Strategy: Get familiar with pain-specific and mental health resources

How does it work? Handouts, online resources, and apps can be really helpful when you are trying to learn and practice a new skill, if you

need a reminder of what has worked in the past, and if you need support or coaching in the moment.

Examples & Resources:

My Care Pathway: Self-guided learning experience to help youth cope with chronic pain

<https://mycarepath.ca/>

The Comfortability: Website with guided relaxation and mindfulness exercises designed for youth with chronic pain conditions. Resources available for teens and parents, including virtual & in-person workshops.

<https://www.thecomfortability.com/>

Coping strategies handout from AnxietyCanada: This resource is a 16-page document that lists a number of different coping strategies that can help you cope with stress and anxiety, but also pain. You'll find information on when to use a specific strategy, how to do it, and videos that can guide you through the instructions.

<https://www.anxietycanada.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/anxiety-bc-coping-strategies-v3-6.pdf>

Solutions for Kids in Pain (SKIP): Collection of evidence-based tools and information regarding acute and chronic pain.

<https://kidsinpain.ca/skip-resources/>

Mental health apps: In addition to other apps mentioned in this handout, the following apps have free versions that can be helpful to youth coping with chronic pain or other challenging experiences.

Be Safe 2.0: Create individualized safety and coping plans that can be accessed during a mental health crisis or when trying to navigate difficult experiences on your own: <https://mindyourmind.ca/series/be-safe-20>

Apps to track your mood, journal, and learn skills to challenge unhelpful thoughts and behaviours:

CBT Self-Care Journal:

<https://apps.apple.com/us/app/cbt-self-care-journal/id1523102810>

CBT Companion: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/cbt-companion-therapy-app/id1445499245>

Strategies to manage pain in the moment

Chronic pain tends to fluctuate and there can be times when you experience pain more strongly than your “normal” pain. This is what we call a pain flare. Pain flares can last anywhere from a few seconds to a few weeks. Here are some strategies that can help you cope with this kind of pain. These strategies can also help you cope with increases in anxiety, irritability, sadness, and frustration, or any kind of challenging day.

Strategy: Calm your body



How does it work? Relaxation or calming strategies are designed to turn on our parasympathetic nervous system (rest & digest system) and strengthen our natural analgesic system.

With practice, people may notice a decrease in muscle tension and stress, which can help increase comfort and/or prevent a pain flare from getting worse.

Some people, especially with lots of practice or if pain is not too high, will also notice a reduction in pain after practicing a relaxation strategy.

Examples:

Pain visualization: Try to imagine the location, shape, colour, and size of your pain and use your mind to imagine softening the edges of your pain, lightening the colour, and shrinking the size of it.

Audio recording: <https://www.podbean.com/ew/pb-tu6uw-7e93f0>

Link to script: https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/1592/3435/files/Guided_Imagery_for_Pain_Relief.pdf

Mental vacation/imagery: Pick a place that you can feel calm or happy, this can be a real place, one that you've been to or that one day you'd like to go to, or a completely made up and imaginary place. Think about what you can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste.

Audio recording: <https://www.anxietycanada.com/articles/quick-mental-vacation/>

Link to script: <https://www.anxietycanada.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Quick-Mental-Vacation.pdf>

Mini breathing exercise: One way to practice deep breathing, is to imagine a word or phrase to repeat to yourself (like “calm” or “relax”) as your exhaling or you can try to direct the breath to any tense spots you notice, whatever that means to you

Autogenic relaxation: A relaxation technique that helps you perceive physical sensations as warm and heavy.

Audio recording: <https://www.podbean.com/ew/pb-d4nam-7e93ee>

Link to script: https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/1592/3435/files/Creating_Feelings_of_Warmth_Relaxation.pdf

Active/progressive muscle relaxation: Squeeze/tense different body parts or your whole body for 5 seconds and then release for 7 seconds. Notice the difference between tension and relaxation, and repeat as many times as desired.

Additional Resources: Download MindShift app (<https://www.anxietycanada.com/resources/mindshift-cbt/>) to access relaxation recordings (Tools > Chill Zone) for free. www.thecomfortability.com also has a link to free pain-specific relaxation exercises (Guided Exercises > Relaxation).

Strategy: Change the way you are thinking

How does it work? The way we think about our pain does not cause pain but can increase our suffering by getting us stuck in unhelpful thinking patterns or actions. This also means that changing the way we think, can help us feel and do better, even if pain is still present.

Examples:



Focus on what you can control in this situation: You might not be able to control how your pain feels in the moment but you can control how you cope with it. Just looking at this handout is an example of taking control of what you can control.

Notice if you are getting caught in a thinking trap: Thoughts like “this pain is never going to end” or “I’m never going to get better” are perfectly normal but are not 100% true and usually make us feel worse than we need to.

Remind yourself that this feeling is temporary: Remind yourself that our bodies cannot sustain this experience forever, think of times when you thought this feeling would never end but it eventually did.



What would you tell a friend in this situation: Sometimes it is hard to challenge our own thoughts, thinking about what you might tell a friend in the same situation can be a helpful way of generating more helpful thoughts to tell ourselves.

Coping cards: Coping cards are cards with mantras, quotes, or sentences that can help you cope in the moment when you’re struggling. These are easier to create when you are not in a flare so that they are ready to use when you need them.

Tips: Thinking strategies are not just about “thinking on the bright side” or “positive thoughts” as this can be very hard to do, hard to truly believe, and can lead to us ignoring important problems that do need our attention. Thinking strategies are about shifting our thoughts to more helpful and realistic thoughts so that we can make decisions that match our values.

Resources: Links to examples that you can use to create your own cards:

https://opi.mt.gov/Portals/182/Page%20Files/Suicide%20Prevention/Documents/Coping%20cards%20on%20ring_for%20print.pdf

<https://www.conncoll.edu/media/new-media/student-experience-section/AffirmationsCopingStatements.pdf>

Strategy: Refocus your attention from symptoms/what's bothering you to the present moment

How does it work? Grounding strategies can help cope with pain flares by shifting our attention from inside our body to outside of our body by using our five senses. When we are experiencing intense pain or emotions, our attention is usually focused on these experiences, which can actually make them feel more intense.

This can become a vicious cycle: Symptom → Pay attention to symptom → Makes symptoms worse → Pay more attention to them

Grounding strategies can help break this vicious cycle to help us do what is important to us.

Examples:

5-4-3-2-1: Name 5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can touch, 2 things you can smell, 1 thing you can taste

5 things about an object: Pick an object (the more boring the better!) and describe 5 things that object that you can experience with your senses (no judgments!) If one object is not enough, pick another one and repeat!

I Spy Shapes: Pick a shape and try to find as many examples of that shape in your immediate surrounding. If one shape is not enough, pick another one and repeat!

Tips: Grounding strategies are really helpful when you need to refocus your attention to get something done (for example, managing pain flares in class or during sports). Note that this is different from trying to “ignore” pain/emotions, which can actually have the opposite effect of increasing pain and difficult emotions.



Strategy: Distraction!

How does it work? Similar to grounding strategies, distraction helps shift our attention away from symptoms to the present moment, which can help reduce the intensity of our feelings and decrease our suffering

Examples:



Active Distraction: Active distractions are activities that require you to participate in some way. These strategies are usually more effective than passive distraction (see below) in drawing our attention away from symptoms. Examples of active distraction include: talking to a friend or family member, playing an instrument, videogames, reading, and painting.

Passive Distraction: Passive distractions are activities that don't require you to participate in them to happen. These are usually not as effective as active distractions but can be really helpful when active distractions feel too difficult to do. Examples of passive distraction include: watching TV, scrolling through social media, or listening to music.

Tips: Distraction is a powerful coping strategy, but it can be hard if this is your only strategy because you will usually need other people, objects, and/or environments to make it happen.

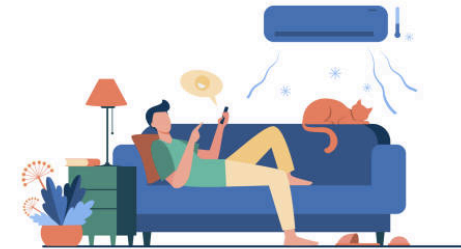
Strategy: Increase your feelings of comfort and safety

How does it work? These strategies give us something to do when we are struggling. We can reach for these items and use our senses to help us feel comfortable and safe. These strategies may not reduce pain per se, but they can help us increase our ability to cope and are a form of self-care.

Examples:

Coping box: Put together a box with items or notes to yourself that can help you feel comfortable and safe. It is easier to create this box when you are not in crisis or in a pain flare so that it is ready to use when you need it. Examples of items include fidget toys, stress balls, bath bombs, colouring books and crayons, journal, lotions or essential oils, nonperishable treats like candy or gum, pictures of people or memories you care about.

Soothing with the five senses: Create a list of different smells, sounds, textures, taste, and sights that you find comforting or can engage your senses in. For example, wrap yourself in a cozy blanket and notice the weight and texture of the blanket. This strategy can also help you brainstorm items to put in your coping box.



Strategy: Reset with a distress tolerance strategy

How does it work? Distress tolerance strategies are designed to help us navigate moments of crisis (either intense pain or emotions). These strategies were not made to help us “solve” or “fix” the problem. Instead these strategies are meant to help us get through difficult moments so that we can do the things that are important to us. These strategies can also help us reset and get to a place where we feel ready to face or solve our problems.

Example:

T.I.P.P.: Temperature – splash your face with cold water, hold an ice cube, or sit in front of the refrigerator or a cool fan. Intense exercise – engage in intense exercise for approximately 20 minutes or until you tire yourself out. Paced breathing – Take in air

for 4 seconds, hold for 4 seconds, breathe out for 4 seconds, hold for 4 seconds and repeat. Paired muscle relaxation – Tighten a specific muscle group for 5 seconds then relax it for 7 seconds

Resources: *Calm Harm app:* A free app with a number of different comfort, distraction, self-expression, and release activity suggestions to help “ride out” a pain flare. This is a really helpful tool to access when you are struggling and finding it challenging to manage the distress on your own or you think you would benefit from some suggestions. Please note that this app was designed for individuals who self-harm, so there is mention of self-harm in the app. If you find this triggering, you can skip this app. Otherwise, you can replace the term “self-harm” with “pain flare” in your mind as you’re navigating through the app. Link to download app: <https://calmharm.co.uk/>



Know when and how to connect with your individual pain team members

Psychology: Our team offers both group and individual pain psychology services. It is usually recommended that youth participate in the seven session cognitive-behavioural group therapy for pain management *prior* to booking individual appointments. Individual appointments are designed to help youth deepen their understanding of psychological pain management strategies and apply these strategies to specific goals. Youth are typically offered 2-4 biweekly individual psychology appointments at a time, and can then book “booster” sessions as needed.

Physiotherapy: Our physiotherapists support the introduction, or re-introduction, to movement – regardless of the type of movement involved. You may want to connect with physiotherapy if movement and activity levels have changed, you have a specific movement based goal (e.g., want to get back to walking, gym class, sport, stairs at school, etc), or if you’ve had a period of inactivity and would like guidance on where to go next.

Physicians & Clinical Nurse Specialists: Our medical team can be helpful to connect with if you are interested in discussing medication options for pain management, to ask about making changes to your current pain medication regime, or to request medication refills. Our clinical nurse specialists are also very strong at providing guidance to parents around how to support youth through our pain program.

Team Follow Ups: These are usually 20-30 minute appointments scheduled with your pain physician, one of our psychologists, physiotherapists, and clinical nurse specialists. Your team may schedule an appointment for you, especially when you are at the initial phases of treatment. You can also request a team appointment if you have a specific goal that you do not have the tools needed to problem solve on your own. You may also benefit from a team appointment if you would like to update or make changes to your current treatment plan. It is helpful to come to these appointments with specific questions or goals that you would like to discuss so that we can make sure that we are talking about what is important to you.



A note on pain flare management: As chronic pain syndromes are chronic in nature, it is very normal to experience prolonged periods of increased pain – what we call “pain flares”. Our team is limited in our ability to intervene during a pain flare because pain flares are best managed by youth themselves. Specifically, pain flares require a deliberate and intentional use of pain management strategies (including from a mind, movement, and sometimes medication, perspective). Our team can be helpful in reminding you of the strategies that have been helpful in the past and reassuring you that pain flares are normal. The best strategy to manage a pain flare is to prevent one by recognizing your triggers and actively engaging in your pain management plan between flares.

Know when and how to connect with targeted mental health services

The following are services that you can connect with if you want to access targeted mental health interventions. These services can be especially helpful if you are noticing that broader anxiety and mood are starting to get in the way of your life and/or your pain management:



School Guidance Counselors: Most schools will have trained counselors who can help students navigate academic and personal challenges. Appointments are typically done at school during school hours. These are great professionals to reach out to when you need help navigating challenges at school and at home, without needing to commit to regular appointments.

Primary Care Providers: Most primary care providers can diagnose mental health problems, explore medication options, request additional testing, and refer you to specialize services.

Community Mental Health Clinics: These are community based free mental health services (covered by provincial health insurance) available to youth and their families. Services include individual, group, and family therapy. Most community mental health clinics offer in-person and virtual appointments. For many of these services you do not need a physician’s referral. Instead, you or your parent will need to contact these services directly.

- Nova Scotia: <https://www.iwk.nshealth.ca/mental-health/mental-health-and-addictions-services-iwk>
- New Brunswick: <https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/corporate/promo/isd.html>
- Prince Edward Island: <https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/topic/youth-mental-health-and-addiction>

Couch of Hope: Free mental health support provided to youth and adults in Nova Scotia. The clinic is run by counseling students (under the supervision of a clinical supervisor) and is a great option for support navigating stressors. They accept new clients in September, January, and May of every year. <https://couchofhope.com/>

Private Psychologists: Most psychologists in the Maritimes can provide psychology services virtually to patients living in any of the Maritime Provinces. There is a fee to access private psychology services, however, most private insurance policies do cover a certain number of sessions.

- Nova Scotia: <https://apns.ca/find-a-psychologist/>
- New Brunswick: <https://cpnb.ca/en/definitions/finding-a-psychologist/>
- Prince Edward Island: <https://papei.org/private-practice-directory>

As with any chronic health condition, it is not uncommon for youth with chronic pain syndromes to experience suicidal thoughts. Fortunately, there are a number of free resources and services available to youth in the Maritimes who are struggling with suicidality. If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, contact 911 or present to the nearest emergency department for care.

Mental Health Mobile Crisis (only available to youth and adults in Nova Scotia): **902.429.8167** or **1.888.429.8167** (toll free). This service is available 24/7. Support is given over the phone or they will come visit you in person in the Halifax area if necessary. They provide immediate crisis support, consult with your existing supports, and will also help you access follow-up care as needed.

Kids Help Phone: Text or call crisis responders by texting CONNECT to **686868** or calling **1-800-668-6868**. Not only is this a service that can help keep you safe, you can also connect with them to talk about what's on your mind even if it is not a "crisis" but you just need someone outside of your friends and family to talk to.

