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## RECOVERING FROM PAIN: STRATEGIES THAT CAN HELP

There are many possible contributors to anyone's pain. Everyone is different and pain is a unique experience for each person. People with pain who use a combination of strategies on a daily basis do better than people who rely on medicines alone. The best outcomes are gained by taking care of the whole person, not just the part of the body where pain is felt.

### Three strategies can help to decrease pain:



Changing how we think  
and talk about pain



Moving every day



Seeking the support of friends,  
family, carers and your healthcare  
team, to assist you in taking a  
proactive approach to your pain

## What is pain?

Pain is complex. We now know pain involves the nervous system, brain and immune system. When you experience pain, nerves send 'protect me' signals to the brain. The brain considers these signals within the context of everything else happening inside and outside your body before deciding on the type and intensity of pain it will create to protect you.

The brain considers many factors when making a decision about its pain response. It draws on information from many different parts of the brain including the areas governing thoughts and beliefs, emotions, mood, memories, and future intentions. This is why you may feel more pain if you are under a lot of stress and less pain if you are more relaxed. Or why you may feel more pain if you are sick than when you are well.



## Changing how we think and talk about pain

The things you say about your pain can affect your thoughts about pain, which in turn will influence the brain's pain response. This is why changing perspectives and words about pain is so important. Research shows that changing unhelpful thoughts and words can help

people who are experiencing pain. Practise positive self-talk and use words that help remind you that you are safe, help you feel less afraid and more in control, and help improve the quality of your life.

Here are some examples:

### Instead of saying:

*My pain is unbearable and I don't know what to do*

### You could say:

*I'm learning more about what makes my pain better or worse so that I can improve my daily life*

### Instead of saying:

*I can't believe that I'm unable to do my usual activities*

### You could say:

*I hope to do things like I used to soon, I'm working on being able to return to the activities that I enjoy*

## Instead of saying:

*Exercise could make my pain worse and hurt me*

## You could say:

*Gentle movement or exercise is good for my body and helps me move more easily*

If you find that changing thoughts and language is difficult, a psychologist can teach you techniques to use at home to help you cope better with your pain and

improve your daily life. A psychologist can also show you how relaxation and meditation can help lessen your pain.



## Moving every day

Starting to increase your movement is an important process for recovery. Movement helps keep your heart and lungs healthy, improves your muscle and joint function, stimulates you mentally, and can help reduce your pain. Stay as active and fit as possible. Find activities that you enjoy. These might be walking, tai chi, swimming, aqua therapy, or cycling. Even making gentle activity part of your daily routine can be beneficial.

Pace yourself: spread your activities and exercise across the day and week.

Start with small amounts of activity and slowly build up the amount from there. When people slowly increase their amount of physical activity over weeks and months it helps reduce their pain.

If you avoid physical activity because of your pain or because you are worried you will damage your body, a physiotherapist or exercise physiologist can give you skills and confidence in safely improving your physical activity levels.





## Seeking social and healthcare team supports

Connecting with people can play a big part in helping you feel better. Keeping in touch with family and friends is good for your overall health. If pain has left you feeling isolated, try to get out, see people and join in with what they are doing. You could join an activity group, such as a cards or book group, talk with family at home, or phone a friend. During the COVID-19 pandemic you will need to consider how to connect

virtually. You could use FaceTime, social media or join an online community group. Getting involved in activities or hobbies that you look forward to and enjoy will help you take a proactive approach to your pain.

Talk to your GP about having a plan for your pain management including DVA-funded services from other members of your healthcare team such as a psychologist or physiotherapist.

**DVA pays for Gold and some White Card holders to receive services from psychologists, physiotherapists, exercise physiologists, dietitians, pain specialists and multidisciplinary pain programs.**

### What else can I do?

- Maintaining a healthy weight can improve symptoms of pain, especially if you have osteoarthritis or other musculoskeletal or joint pain. If you need help with your diet, your GP and a dietitian can help develop a plan for you.
- A good night's rest can help you cope with your pain. If you are concerned that you are not sleeping well and think it is lessening the quality of your life, talk to your GP about some sleep skills. For practical tips, see the veteran brochure *Sleep well, feel well* at: [www.veteransmates.net.au/topic-55](http://www.veteransmates.net.au/topic-55)
- If you use medicines for pain, get the best from them by also using other methods of pain management. For most medicines, there is evidence that they will not help your pain in the long term and they can also come with unwanted side effects. Talk to your GP or pharmacist if you have questions about your medicines.

**Remember: Changing how you think and talk about pain, moving every day, and seeking out social and healthcare team supports are likely to be the most useful ways to help reduce pain and improve day-to-day life.**