

# TBI and Chronic Pain: Part 2

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TBI Factsheets

Part 2: This factsheet will explain some of the more common ways people manage chronic pain without the use of medication.

## What You Can do About Your Pain.

In the same way pain is personal, so too are strategies for managing it. Learning to manage pain is a process that takes practice. Don't get discouraged if it is difficult at the start.

In this document you'll find some common strategies for dealing with pain, but there are others. You may have to try a few approaches before you find the right one. Using a combination of many techniques may work best for you. Most pain medicines do not work well for chronic pain and many are habit-forming. This fact-sheet explores ways to manage pain that don't involve taking medication. Most people with pain will gain from seeing a psychologist or other provider for help. At the end of this factsheet is a log that you can use to record your pain and how you are working to manage it. Tracking your pain for two weeks and showing the log to your health care provider is a great way to begin.

There are many different strategies that people use to manage their pain. Some of them are:

- Exercise
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
- Scheduled rests or Pacing
- Meditation
- Biofeedback
- Breathing exercises
- Hypnosis
- Visualization
- Art therapy
- Acupuncture
- Massage
- Heat or ice
- Social activities

The Traumatic Brain Injury Model System study is sponsored by the National Institute of Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Community Living. (See <http://www.msktc.org/tbi/model-system-centers> for more information.)

## Exercise

Exercise is a proven way to manage pain. It prompts your brain to release serotonin and endorphins. These chemicals are strong pain killers and elevate your mood. If you have limitations talk with your health care team about exercise. They can help you plan a routine that is safe for you.

## Yoga

Yoga is usually a low impact exercise that involves timing movements with your breath. There are many different styles of yoga. It can be often be adjusted for people with disabilities. Regularly doing mind-body exercise, like yoga, can help with strength, function, and mood, all of which can improve pain. The stretching and slow movements can also decrease painful muscle spasms.



## Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) helps you change your thoughts or actions. It helps you make the voice in your head work for you instead of against you. CBT usually means you will set goals and work with a counselor to plan for how to achieve them. CBT is often used to manage anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and pain. If you are interested in learning more, ask your health care team to help find a provider who practices CBT.

### Coping Thoughts

Grounding yourself with coping thoughts can help you get through a stressful or painful time. It may be a good idea to make a list. Some examples are:

- "I know I can handle this."
- "It could be worse."
- "This is tough, but I will survive."
- "I am strong enough to do this."
- "I have gotten through more difficult things."

## Managing Your Activity

**Pacing** will help you shift from stopping an activity after you feel pain to pausing before you feel pain. Pacing helps you to do the things that are important to you while conserving your energy. Taking short breaks throughout your day, or even during an activity, will allow you to do more over time. Pay attention to how your body feels during and after activities. Learning to pace takes practice. You can use the log at the end of this factsheet to track your activity and help you start pacing.

**Delegating** is finding ways to have other people do some things, so you can save energy, which is likely to help with your pain.

- Use a grocery service or app instead of going to the store yourself.
- Ask your partner to carry the laundry to the machine and then you wash and fold it.

**Adjusting** is finding different ways to do things that might be draining or time consuming, which can also help lessen pain.

- Instead of cooking every night you could use a slow cooker to make several meals at once.
- Lay your clothes out and iron them before you go to bed to save time in the morning.

### Distraction

Pain needs an audience. If you're not paying attention to your pain, it will trouble you less. Some things you can try to take your mind off of pain:

- Read or watch TV.
- Listen to music or a podcast.
- Do some cleaning.
- Focus on your breathing.
- Call a friend.
- Go to a park, museum, or library with someone who you enjoy spending time with.
- Play cards or a game with friends.
- Do some gardening.

## Relaxation Strategies

There are many ways that you can help your body relax. Reducing tension in your body can reduce your pain. You may need to try a few things before you find the one that is right for you.

### Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a type of meditation. The idea is to be present in the moment. Do not worry about what has already happened or may happen in the future. This practice centers on being aware of your breath and observing yourself. Notice your thoughts, feelings and emotions without judging or placing value on them. This calm attention leads to awareness of things that we often ignore. Mindfulness gives many people a new understanding of their pain and more control over it. Mindfulness can also help with anxiety and improve focus, both of which can help pain.



*Acknowledge your pain and examine it as you would with something you've just discovered. Study how it feels, the emotions you have in response to it, and how your body reacts to those sensations and emotions. Then direct your attention to the sounds around you. After you've examined those, repeat this with your other senses (sight, smell, touch).*

## Biofeedback

There are many kinds of biofeedback. The idea is to understand the signals in your body related to pain or anxiety and learn to control them. For example, fast heart rate and rapid breathing are connected to anxiety. Slowing your breath and heart rate can tell your body it's alright to relax. A trained therapist can teach you biofeedback.

## Controlled breathing

Controlled breathing is one type of biofeedback. It uses the fact that your heart beats slower while you are exhaling than during the inhale. Drawing out your exhale can help you slow your heartrate. Breathing into your belly can stimulate digestion. Controlled breathing does both of these things, signaling your body to return to a calm state.

*Sit in a comfortable place with few distractions. Place one hand over your stomach and the other on your chest. Breathe in through your nose counting to two in your head. Feel the hand over your stomach rise as you inhale. Breathe out through your mouth with your lips pursed. As you do this count in your head to four and feel the hand on your stomach fall.*

## Autogenic relaxation

Autogenic means "self-regulated". During Autogenic Relaxation you tell yourself that you are relaxed. While you do this picture different parts of your body relaxing. Learning how to relax takes practice, be patient and treat this like any other skill that you have learned. It's normal for this to be challenging in the beginning.

*Sit in a comfortable place with few distractions. Close your eyes and picture your right arm. Tell yourself "My right arm is warm and heavy" then feel your right arm relax. Repeat this exercise with your left arm, shoulders, jaw, back, right leg, and left leg.*

## Finding What Works

Remember both pain and how to manage it are personal. Something that works for you may not work for someone else. Don't be discouraged if you don't find the right method to manage your pain right away. At the end of this factsheet there is a log that you can use to record your pain. Tracking your pain for two weeks and showing the log to your health care team is a great way to begin.

Many of the techniques discussed above can help you reach your pain management goals and live a more functional and satisfying life. When you do find the right strategy or strategies practice them daily even if you don't have pain. Controlling your pain is a skill and it takes time to develop skills. There are many apps, video tutorials, and websites that can help you grow these skills. You can also use the log at the end of this document to track your pain management progress.

Consider asking your care team about a **pain rehabilitation program**. This is a more intensive program where a many different specialists work with you. They will teach you ways to manage pain without medication. Treatment may last for several days or weeks.

## Disclaimer

This information is not meant to replace the advice from a medical professional. You should consult your health care provider regarding specific medical concerns or treatment.



## Source

The information presented in parts one and two of the factsheet TBI and Chronic Pain is also available in a four-part InfoComic series TBI and Chronic Pain. This factsheet and the comic have been developed concurrently and present the same information.

The factsheet TBI and Chronic Pain was written by Silas James, MPA; Jeanne Hoffman, PhD; Sylvia Lucas, MD, PhD; Anne Moessner, APRN; Kathleen Bell, MD; William Walker, MD; CJ Plummer, MD; Max Hurwitz, DO.

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Please send any feedback or questions about this factsheet to [tbicomix@uw.edu](mailto:tbicomix@uw.edu)

You can also find this information in the InfoComic series: TBI and Chronic Pain at: [comics.tbi.washington.edu](http://comics.tbi.washington.edu).





