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Reset Your Pain Alarm

Workbook

How to Break the Pain-Fear Cycle



When pain is present in the body, it is natural to experience a fear-based response in the brain. What most people do not realize is that **this holds true in reverse** as well: when fear is present in the brain, it is natural to experience a physical response in the body.

This physical response can show up in obvious ways, like increased heart rate, adrenaline, or muscle tension. It can also show up in less obvious ways, like **intensifying physical symptoms that were already present in the body**.

In chronic pain, fear and pain constantly fuel one another, creating a cycle. **Over time, this ongoing excess of fear can:**



Put the mind in a downward spiral of anxiety



Make the experience of pain feel physically worse



Make it easier for the brain to activate fight-or-flight mode



Cause the nervous system to stay on high alert

With practice, you can gain a lot of control over fear. **When you can reduce the fear, you may also be able to:**



Decrease mental anxiety and improve your daily mood



Reduce the physical intensity of symptoms



Reduce the frequency of symptom flare-ups



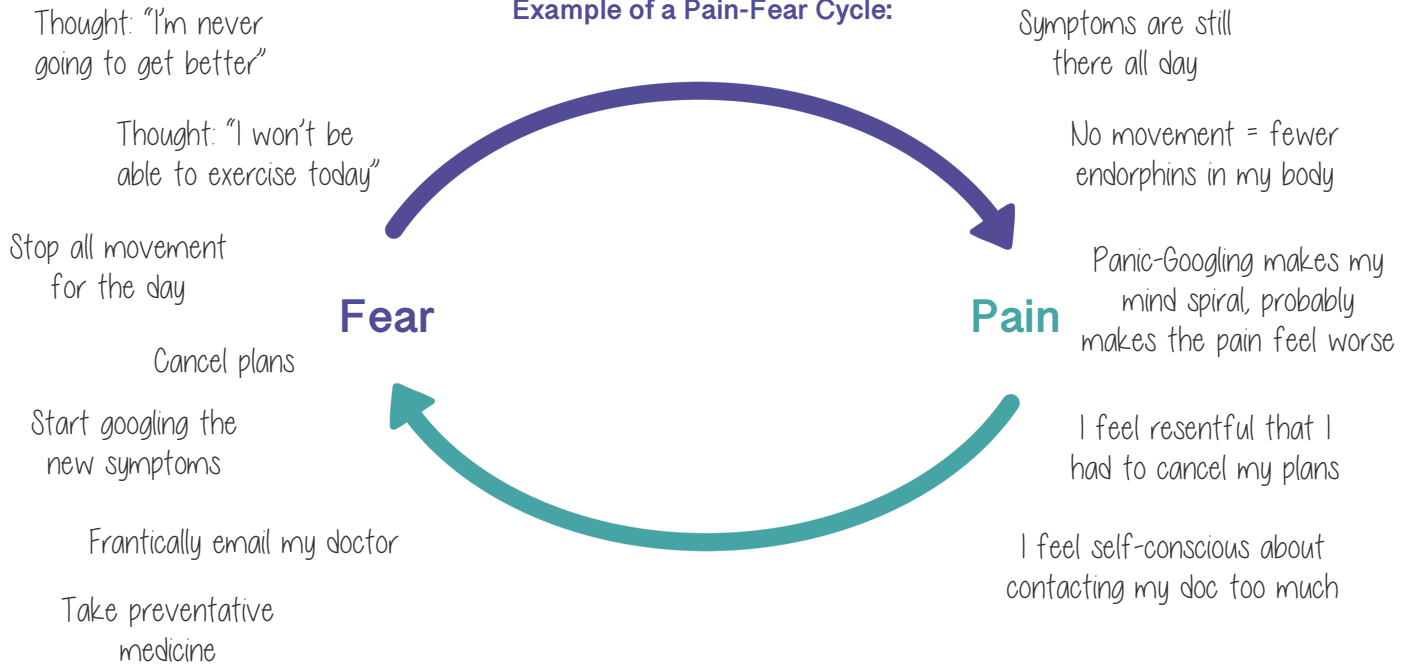
Enjoy activities you may be avoiding due to fear

The activity on the following page is designed to help you see what your current “pain-fear” cycle looks like and to help you identify which pieces you can control.

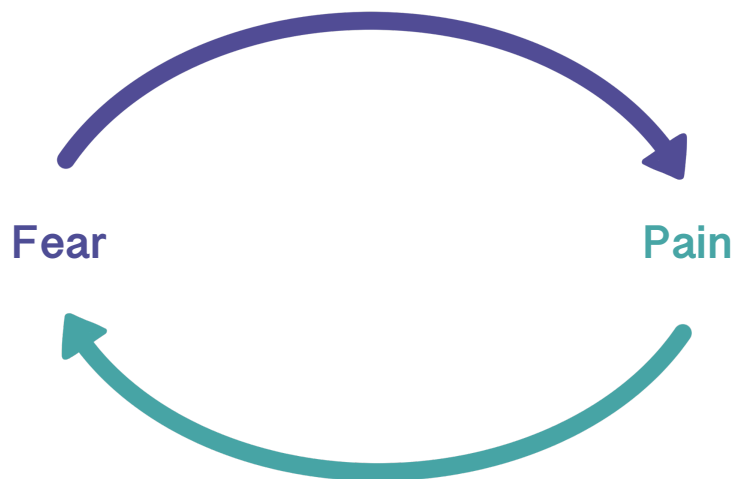
Instructions: On the left side of the page, list all of the fear-based thoughts, worries, and activities that come naturally to you when pain is present.

On the right side, fill in the impact of these thoughts, worries, and activities on both your **physical and emotional pain**.

Example of a Pain-Fear Cycle:




Your Pain-Fear Cycle:



Look at the **left side** of your page (the “fear” side). Which of these thoughts and actions are within your control to change?



Of the items that are within your control, which ones are directly related to negative outcomes you can see on the **right side** of your page (the “pain” side)?



What could you do **differently** in the future to prevent this pain-fear cycle from spiraling downward?



How to Overcome the 5 Fs



Howard Schubiner, MD, has been helping patients recover from chronic pain for decades. Through treating thousands of patients, he noticed 5 key things that hold people back from recovery, which he calls the "5 Fs":

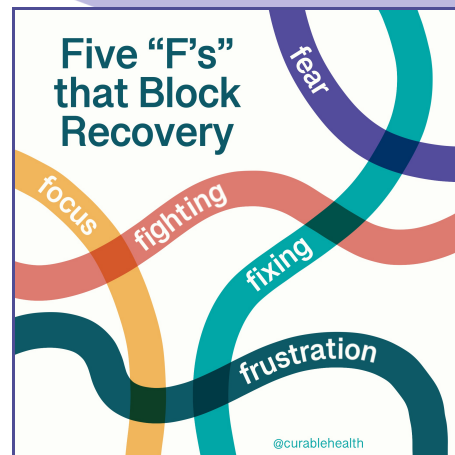
FOCUSING on the pain

FIGHTING against the pain

FEARING the pain

Trying to **FIX** the pain

Getting **FRUSTRATED** with the pain



In order to reset your pain alarm, you don't need to be perfect in avoiding these 5 Fs. It's okay to be fearful or frustrated or slip back into old habits sometimes. However, it is critical to **be prepared** so that when you realize you are stuck in one of the 5 Fs, you know what to do.

When the 5 Fs show up, what will you do to shift away from them?

When I notice that I'm **FOCUSING** on the pain, I will...

When I notice that I'm **FIGHTING** against the pain, I will...

When I notice that I'm **FEARING** the pain, I will...

When I notice that I'm trying to **FIX** the pain, I will...

When I notice that I'm getting **FRUSTRATED** with the pain, I will...

How to Reset Your Pain Language



When it comes to pain, language matters. Whenever you say (or think) a certain word, it paints a mental image in your brain. That image has an impact on how the brain responds to a physical symptom. Words like **“stabbing,” “sharp,”** and **“unbearable”** can light up the brain’s fear centers, while words like **“soothing”** or **“comfortable”** can neutralize some of the brain’s fear. This is why many people find it helpful to replace phrases like “I’m in stabbing, unbearable pain” with something like “I’m less comfortable than I would like to be right now.”

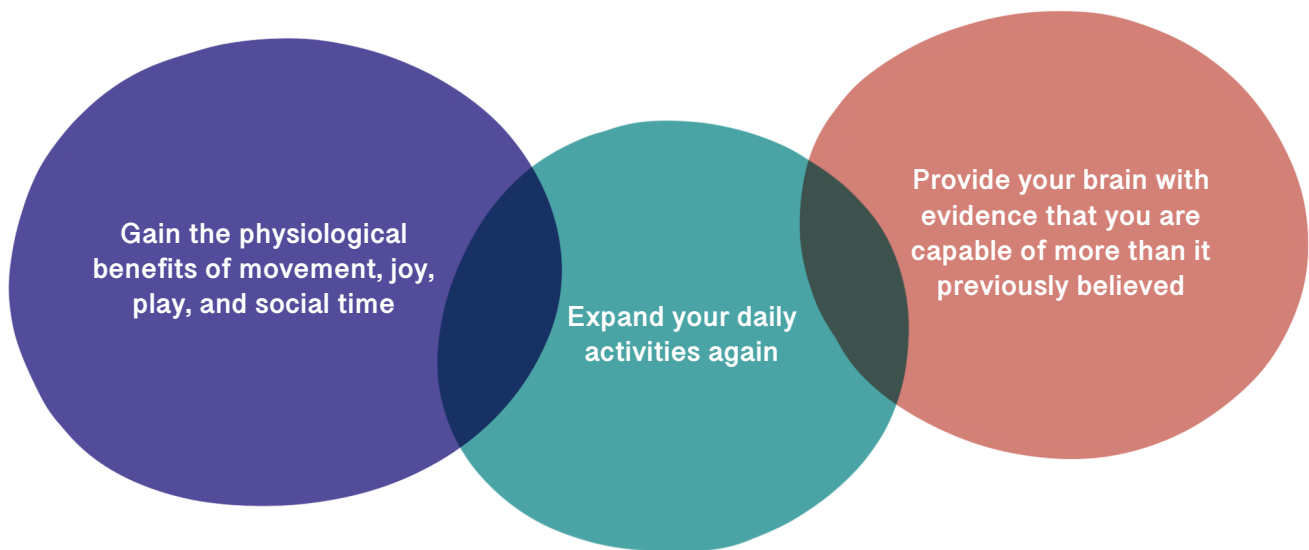
Think about the words and phrases you use to describe your symptoms. Close your eyes, say them out loud and notice how they feel in your body. **Which 5 words or phrases evoke the most negative sensations in your body?**

What words or phrases could you replace these with that evoke more positive or neutral sensations? Get creative! Headaches could become “sparkles,” pain could become “sensations,” and “I’m having a flare up” could become “It’s party time.”

How to Become Outcome Independent



When you are outcome independent, it means that you are not tied to a specific result or outcome. No matter what happens (or doesn't happen!), you trust that you are strong enough to handle it. This mindset can help you to:



Here's an example of outcome independence in action:

Jorge has experienced back pain for many decades. Before the pain, he used to take long walks in his neighborhood to clear his mind each morning. Over time, as the pain got worse, Jorge began to fear that walking was dangerous and these walks were eliminated from his routine. Jorge's physician has advised him that while walking may be painful for him, it is not dangerous. Even so, he has not started to walk again because he is afraid that he will experience more pain and become useless for the rest of the day if he takes a morning walk.

One morning, Jorge decided to try practicing outcome independence. He decided that walking was important to him, even if it did sometimes lead to pain. He also noticed that some days, his back was in pain even though he had skipped his morning walk. Jorge saw that either way, he may experience pain, but if he walked, at least he got to do what he wanted to do.

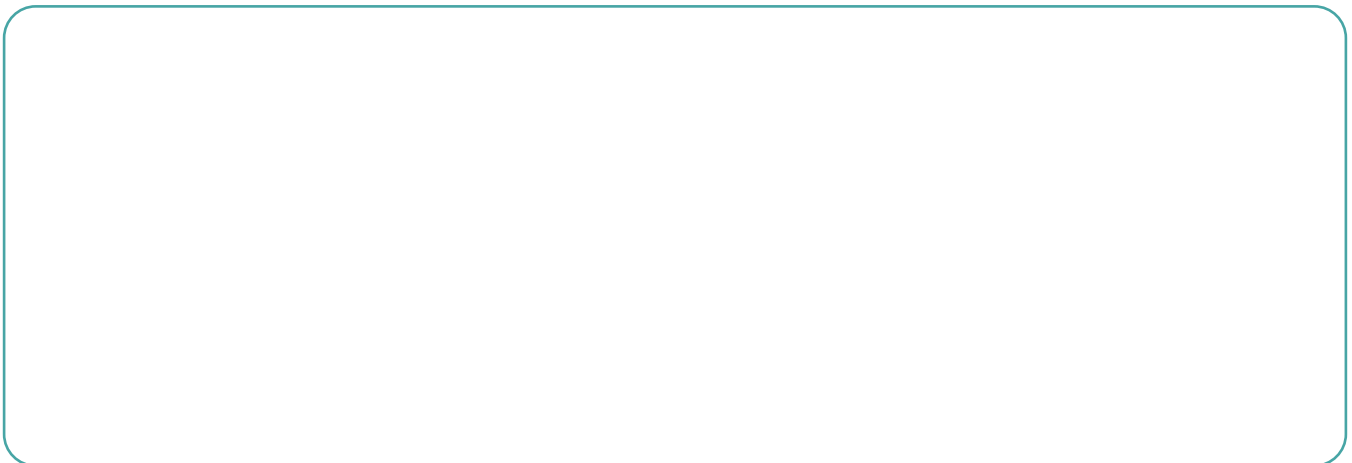
*Armed with this outlook, Jorge decided that he would go for a short morning walk. Maybe it would cause more pain in his back, maybe it would not. If the pain flared up, Jorge knew from years of evidence that he would be able to handle it. **Jorge decided that the action (going for a walk) was more important to him than the risk of the possible negative outcome (a flare-up), and that even if this outcome came to pass, he could handle it.***

List out a few of the activities you WANT to do, but that you have stopped doing due to the fear that it will make the pain worse.

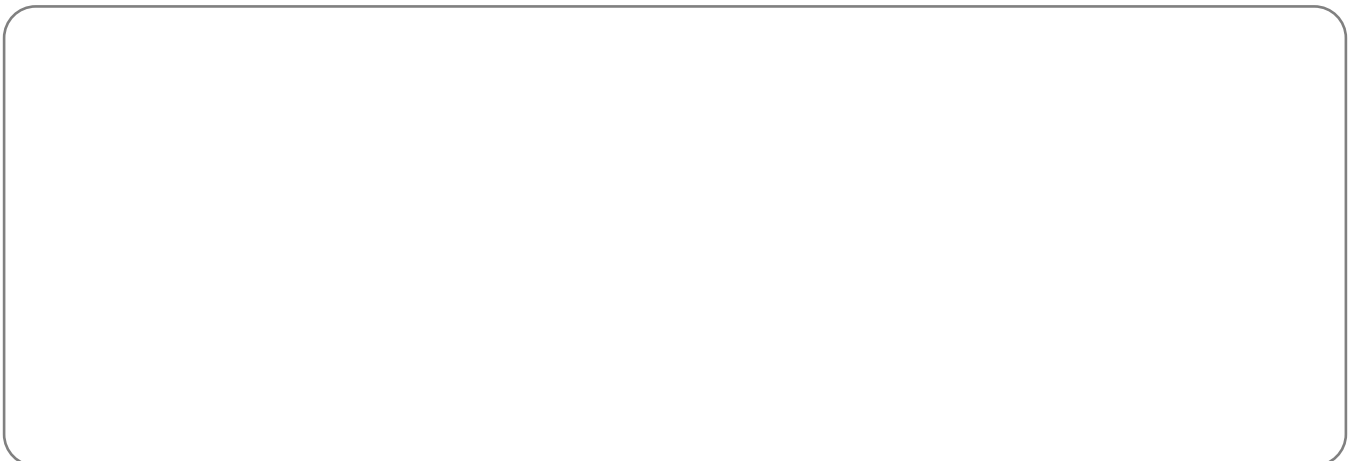


Choose the activity from this list that feels most important to you and respond to the following questions:

What would it mean to you to be able to perform this activity again?



What is the negative outcome that you are afraid will happen if you perform this activity?



Has this negative outcome ever happened to you before? If so, were you able to handle it?



Does this negative outcome sometimes happen even when you are doing everything “right” and avoiding this activity?



So long as your clinician has not specifically given you instructions to avoid this activity, would you consider attempting using outcome independence? If so, write down the specifics of how, when, and where you plan to try this.



How to Use Setbacks to Move Forward



Setbacks, flare-ups, and new symptoms are a natural part of the healing process. However, when you view a setback as a “step backwards,” your pain alarm will see it as a threat. When this happens, the brain’s fear centers become activated, amplifying existing symptoms and making the setback worse than it already was.

When it comes to setbacks, expectations are everything. In the healing journey (and in life!), here are a few things you should expect to happen:

It is a reality of the human body that you will experience pain sometimes.

Since everything is always changing, pain will also change, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse.

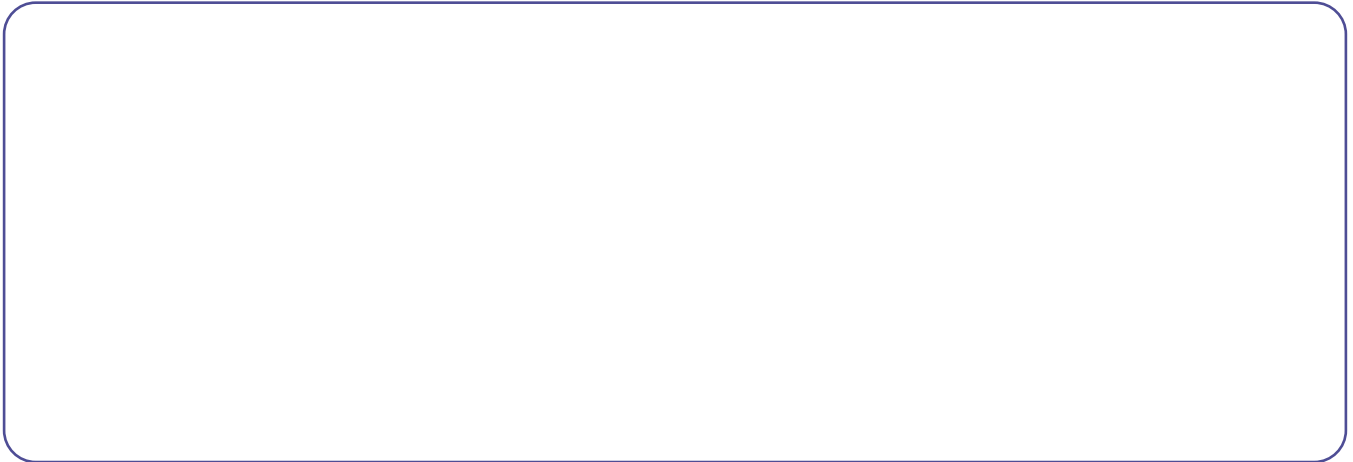
The more practice you have with successfully navigating setbacks, the more likely you will be able to move through them without fear.

The less fear you experience during a setback, the more quickly you will be able to move through it.

The goal of healing is not to eliminate pain forever, it is to change your body’s response. **Setbacks are a rare and powerful opportunity to practice** new strategies, observe what works for you, and set yourself up for lifelong success.

Think about your most recent setback. What thoughts and feelings did you have during this time? What actions did you take? How did that go for you?

Think about your next setback. What would you like to do differently (or the same) in order to achieve a better result?



Visualization Exercise

Close your eyes and visualize your next setback. Imagine that as it approaches, you are completely calm. You are expecting its arrival and are excited to use it as an opportunity. Imagine yourself completing the routine you outlined above. Finally, imagine the setback or flare-up slowly calming down and moving on. Thank it for the opportunity to practice, then open your eyes.

