

# Why Movement Beats Resting if You Have Persisting Pain

*Written for PainChats by Dr Ellie Somers, Physical Therapist.*

## Should You Keep Exercising If It Hurts?

Pain keeps many people from exercising the way they want to. Many will assume that if they experience pain, more exercise will only make it worse. Having pain does not mean you have to stop doing all exercise, but rather that it is time for you to get smart about doing your favourite moves so that you can keep living a full and happy life.

The good news is that our bodies love to move, even when we are experiencing debilitating pain. Sometimes it's just about finding the right thing to do that will work for you. There are some key concepts to appreciate that will help you move in the right direction.

## Pain Does Not Necessarily Mean You Are Damaged or Broken

Pain can signal serious health conditions that need to be checked, but that is not always the case. Pain is more accurately an indication that your nervous system is on high alert. Our nervous systems are amazingly equipped at protecting us and keeping us alive.

Many people feel that pain means something must be broken and needs to be "fixed." But human bodies will often fix the broken parts quite well without any help.



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Certain environments can change our pain, based on our past experiences. For example, if you hurt yourself in the gym, you may continue to experience a lot of pain while at the gym because your nervous system is continuing to keep you safe.

Often the experience of pain will continue long after the damaged tissue has fully healed.

But it can take time for you – and your nervous system – to figure out which exercises are safe. Long-term pain doesn't necessarily mean you are still damaged. It simply means you need to start exploring your limits so that you and your nervous system can learn what those limits are for you.

## Exploring Exercise and Movement

There is a misconception that if you experience pain you should to tighten your boundaries to protect your body. This stems from a perception that people experiencing pain are fragile. Your pain is not an indication of fragility.

Moving past any painful experience requires exploration. Only by testing the limits of your movements causing pain can you learn those limits and begin to expand them. If the boundaries are not pushed, they will stay exactly where they are, and potentially even shrink.

This is why it's vital to keep moving, even when in pain. It is not only vital to reducing your pain, but to maintaining your health and wellbeing. Learning how much is too much will be helpful in your recovery.

## Gentle Progressions to Build Your Capacity

While testing and pushing your limits is important, if you are not familiar with how that feels, your nervous system can respond more aggressively than you anticipated. Gradual progressions back to your normal routine are key to moving you forward. That might mean getting back to the gym and using lighter weights than what you were using prior to your painful experience or injury.

This can be frustrating when you feel like you should be able to lift the same amount of weight as before. The reality is that our tissues respond to loading by getting stronger, but they also adapt to unloading by getting weaker. If you haven't had time to exercise, your tissues adapt accordingly and will need some time to build back up to where they were before. Be patient and work to build yourself back up in a gradual way.

## Find Joy in the Exercise You Choose

Many people wonder which exercises are best for their pain, but there are no absolutes in what you choose to do. Any exercise you choose to do is the best exercise you can do.

It is not logical to be torturing yourself with exercises you find mundane or painful for the sake of being painful. Whatever exercise you decide to do to get better, find ways to make it fun and joyful. You will be more likely to continue to do that exercise and move on the path towards recovery if you choose to engage in activities you love. It can help to find community and social engagement with your activities.

Only through gradual increased movement and exercise can you explore your capacity push it further.



## Personal Notes and Reflections

1. What information did you read here that is relevant to your pain experience?
2. What did you read here that surprised you, or that you disagree with? Why do you think that is?
3. Are there any actions that you want to take after reading this information?

You can use your responses here to talk to your health professionals, or you can email your questions to the **PainChats** team via [hello@painchats.com](mailto:hello@painchats.com)

