

SMART Pacing

Finding balance in life is important for us all, but for some a strict pacing routine can mean enjoying life again. Let's see how...

You can apply the skills you learned in our article on **Goal Setting** (see the Personal Development page of the Stitchlinks website) and SMART goals to the way you manage conditions such as chronic pain, fibromyalgia or ME. Pacing is a way of breaking up your day into manageable time slots to enable you to reach your end goal without increasing your pain levels or exhausting your energy stores.

The SMART way

Let's start by having a quick recap on SMART goals...

'S' stands for SPECIFIC

– the exact meaning of your goal needs to be clear. If you set yourself something vague to aim for the chances are you will fail.

'M' is for MEASURABLE

– you need to know when you've reached your goal and also how to measure any success or setbacks along the way to enable you to change tactics if necessary. Keep a mental

note of your progress and allow some flexibility for set backs and flare-ups. They will happen so factor them into your plans.

'A' is for ACHIEVABLE

– your goal must be possible to achieve. This doesn't mean your goals should be easy, but it does mean that, with effort and drive, you stand a good chance of reaching your target. Work out what your eventual goal is then to break it up into achievable amounts.

'R' is for REALISTIC

– when you're setting your goals take into account the other demands on your time and energy.

'T' is for TIME-BASED

– for a goal to be successful you need to know when it needs to be achieved by, so give yourself a deadline. Don't just pull a date arbitrarily out of a hat, though, give it thought and apply the other SMART guidelines. A deadline that's too tight will cause you stress and will probably fail, but if you give yourself too

much time you'll find it difficult to start and keep putting it off because you've 'got plenty of time'. The ideal is to stretch yourself a little

In pacing you learn to break up bigger tasks into smaller, more manageable bites to achieve your targets. Use your SMART goals knowledge to set your individual goals.

without causing pressure, so that when you successfully reach your goal, you'll feel a great sense of achievement and a boost in self esteem.

As with setting SMART goals, in pacing you learn to break up bigger tasks into smaller, more manageable bites to achieve your targets. It works if you suffer from depression too, as smaller tasks are less daunting when motivation is low.

It's common for those suffering pain or low energy

to have 'good' days and 'bad' days. The natural way of reacting to these is to do as much as you possibly can on good days and to rest up on bad ones. Overdoing it, or pushing through pain to complete an activity will lead to an increase in pain or a decrease in energy levels. This could easily result in the next few days being wiped out while you recover. Doing too much can make your symptoms worse, but so can doing too little as it leads to muscle weakness and stiffness. Living your life in

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this way will result in cycles of overactivity and underactivity. This eventually leads to greater disability, increased pain and less being achieved. For ME and fibromyalgia sufferers expending more energy than you have available can intensify your symptoms, too.

Act don't react

When balancing your life through pacing you carry out your activities and rest periods according to a planned schedule rather

than as a reaction to your symptoms. This enables you to act positively on your symptoms instead of reacting to them, putting you back in control. It's all about living within your pain and energy limits to enable you to take part in life – to lead a more fulfilled life. It can also lead to a better night's sleep as you won't have stirred up your symptoms by over activity during the day.

You will need to prioritise and schedule tasks and eliminate some altogether. Not exceeding your pain or energy levels means you can carry out your tasks on good and bad days. This will even out the highs and lows you would normally experience and increase your overall functional ability. With perseverance you'll find your days will gradually even out and you'll achieve much more in the end.

To be successful, pacing will entail a change in your attitudes and behaviour. You'll need to rethink the way you've always done things. It may also mean changing some of your life expectations as it necessitates an acceptance of your limitations, but at the same time it will open up other avenues and possibilities, so try to focus on these positive aspects.

You may find you have to delegate some activities, whilst others might need to be simplified or carried out differently. You'll probably

need to ask for, and accept help, both physically and emotionally. This might entail a change in your relationships with others and how you see yourself. So you can expect at first to feel frustrated or angry, but try to remember that these are normal emotions experienced when going through such change.

The good news is that fear of certain activities may have made you previously discount them, but with pacing you may be able to enjoy them again in smaller bites. Gardening is a classic example of an activity often stopped by those with back pain. If you take your gardening tasks and apply pacing combined with good posture and lifting advice then there's no reason why you shouldn't enjoy a horticultural potter again.

Achieve more

Pacing is more than imposing a time limit on your activities, it's about looking at tasks differently. It involves using **time** to prompt you to rest or change position and not measuring your activities by pain or energy levels. It means finding a way of living life by approaching what you need to do from a different angle.

Anne, an ME sufferer has perfected pacing, living her life in 15 minute slots. This helps her to achieve what she sets out to without exhausting her energy

levels. The allocated time slots for each activity will vary with each individual and you are the only person who can set your particular pacing limits. It takes a lot of self discipline and planning as you must resist the temptation to finish a task if that time slot is up. Nobody is saying pacing is easy, but it can transform your life.

Getting started

It will take a bit of trial and error to get things right. You'll need to time yourself in standing, sitting, walking and other activities. Your aim will be to stop just short of increasing your symptoms. So if, for example, you can stand for eleven minutes before your symptoms get worse, set 10 minutes as your maximum for standing. You may find you can sit for longer than you can stand, or vice versa. You need to be strict about the timing and carry around a personal timer. Choose one with a discreet sound because if you're relaxing you don't want to be jolted into reality by a loud alarm. When your timer goes off, change your position and switch tasks or rest. It's important to intersperse activities with rest time and enjoyment time. If you've got something on in the evening, pace your day to include more rest periods in order to conserve your energy.

Successful pacing involves spreading your

workload across a day or full week and interspersing these with rest, social and enjoyable activities. Housework can be spread across the week, whereas cooking an evening meal is best spread across the day. View it as a routine that makes the best use of your physical ability.

Once you've established your baselines it's a good idea to sort your activities into high, medium and low intensity. You could also divide them into physical, mental, emotional and social tasks. Keep

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a pacing diary and take note of the times when you would normally feel at your best and your worst. Now look at how many rest periods you'll need and slot these evenly throughout your day. Schedule in the more demanding or important tasks into the times of day when you have more energy or less pain. You may like to allocate a rest period to the times when you feel at your lowest, or alternatively you may prefer to knit or stitch

during these times to take your mind off pain or other problems. Continue to piece together your day very much like a jigsaw remembering to alter your positions and switch task intensity. Don't schedule in high intensity tasks together and always make time for enjoyment.

Remember leisure

It's important to pace your leisure and exercise time too. If your sitting limit is ten minutes you shouldn't stitch for longer than this, even though the act of stitching may have distracted you from your pain. It's important to get up, walk around and stretch before you reach your pain limit. Your knitting and stitching can be used to aid pacing as a relaxation and stress management tool. They can also reduce the frustration of enforced rest periods enabling you to be and feel productive within these periods.

As for exercise, ask a chartered physiotherapist for an exercise regime adapted to your pacing needs. For example, exercises in sitting and standing shouldn't exceed your time limits in those positions. Task difficulty levels and positions should be alternated in the same way.

The good news is that as well as managing your daily tasks, pacing can also be applied to more long-term goals. Knowing your limits gives you a base from which

to measure and increase your stamina and activity levels. Once you've settled into your routine you can explore gradually increasing your limits and improving your stamina within your pain or energy levels.

It's important to plan this in advance. Decide beforehand when and by how much to up your time and do it very gradually. Don't make the decision on the spur of the moment just because you're having a good day or you'll soon be back into your activity / inactivity cycle. Instead, use

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pacing with a graded activity programme. A chartered physiotherapist will be able to help you with this.

Stress saps energy, so as well as using your knitting and stitching it's a good idea to learn other techniques of stress management. Deep breathing and progressive muscle relaxation are great techniques to have at hand for days when you need extra support. Mindfulness is another technique rapidly gaining recognition for it's

benefits in helping those living with persistent pain to lead more fulfilled lives despite their pain.

Special occasions always need extra planning as they demand more energy. Include extra rest periods and investigate different ways of achieving your goals. A good example is to shop online as long queues at the check outs may entail you standing for longer than your pacing time limit.

Make it routine

For pacing to be successful for you, your established routine needs to be flexible. You'll inevitably have flare ups of your symptoms, so it's important to have a contingency plan ready to put into action when these days hit out of the blue. Include enjoyable activities such as watching a favourite DVD in your flare-up plans so you don't resent these episodes. Instead learn to accept them as a normal part of your life. Also accept that your situation will change and when it does you'll need to adapt your routine to match new demands or baselines.

To make pacing easier, rope in a friend and carry out a time and motion study of your home and work place. Try to ensure that tools for a job are stored near where you will be performing that job to minimise the amount of walking you do and the amount of time you take to

carry out a task. It'll ensure you fit a lot more into a day.

We realise this sounds like a complicated way of living life, but once you get used to pacing you'll find it enables you to do a lot more every day. It will give you structure and something to aim for, which is good for overall well-being. Pacing can be life transforming.

We should all try to balance our lives to include periods of relaxation and fun. We should also try to spread our work load to avoid the stress of doing things at the last minute so some degree of pacing is good for us all.

Read our Goal Setting article on the Personal Development page of the Stitchlinks website and learn to break up your jobs and goals into smaller, more manageable bites. If you find you are unable to do certain activities that you used to enjoy, find alternatives to replace them.

It's in the balance

Pacing means balancing life within your body's abilities, tolerances and energy levels whether you're fit and healthy or managing long term illness. It's a great way to lead a more fulfilled life, of being part of life again, and not missing days due to increased pain or exhaustion.

It's important not to look at pacing as a burden but as a valuable tool which could enable you to look after yourself and live a fuller life.

Tips for successful pacing...

- **Find your baselines** – Time yourself in different positions and carrying out different activities to find your limit. Set your baselines at just below these limits. Be strict and use a timer.
- **Divide up your tasks** – Look at your tasks and split them into high, medium and low intensity. It might also help to divide them into physical, mental, emotional and social as well.
- **Identify your good times** – Slot in more demanding tasks into the time of day when you're at your best and lighter tasks or rest periods into the time of day when you're not so good.
- **Spread your tasks** – Rather than doing your housework in one morning, spread it across the week. Spread your tasks over a day or a longer. Intersperse with rest periods and things you enjoy.
- **Vary your positions** – As you switch tasks vary your positions, always maintaining good posture and following lifting advice. See the *Stitchlinks Posture Guide* in our *Health Matters* section.
- **Be very strict** – Don't be tempted to extend your baseline to finish off a task however good you feel. Come back to it later. This will be frustrating, but you'll get it done without increasing pain.
- **Carry out a time and motion study** – Enlist the help of a friend to carry out a time and motion study of your home and work place. Move things so that tools are near the job to be done.
- **Learn to delegate** – Learning and accepting your limitations is an important part of pacing. Delegate jobs that are too difficult or heavy. Take on some lighter jobs in return.
- **Be flexible** – Establish a routine but be flexible. This will help you to avoid frustration when you suffer the inevitable flare-ups. Have a contingency plan ready involving enjoyable activities.
- **Set goals** – Once your baselines are sorted and your pacing is under control, set long-term goals and investigate increasing your limits. Explore a graded activity programme to increase stamina.
- **Plan your graded increases** – Plan increasing time limits and their increments in advance. Don't just do it as you feel like it as you'll soon be back to your overactivity/underactivity cycle.
- **Learn relaxation techniques** – Use these to slot between activities. They're also good in emergencies, for example if you experience a pain spasm or panic attack when out and about.
- **Prepare for special occasions** – These occasions are more demanding, so programme in more rest periods and look at different ways of achieving your goals. Avoid long waits in queues.
- **Keep a diary** – An activity diary and a record of your symptoms and feelings will help you to identify problem times and areas where you can improve and refine your pacing routine.
- **Prioritise your activities** – Eliminate unnecessary tasks and prioritise the rest. Don't forget to keep activities you enjoy high on your priority list and schedule them into your daily plan.
- **Exercise** – Inactivity also leads to increased pain, so proper graded exercise is important. See a chartered physiotherapist for advice and an exercise regime to fit your pacing baselines.
- **Review your sensory input** – You may find you need to pace your sensory input and regulate time in front of the TV, on the phone or in crowds. These activities can drain energy.
- **Replace activities** – Find alternatives to hobbies and interests you can no longer do. Change the way you do things. Accepting a disability badge might enable you to go shopping.