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## Pain – learning to live

Many issues affect the pain you experience making it an individual experience, but you can have control. Here's how...

As we've seen in Parts two and three, some of the skills taught on pain management courses such as mindfulness and relaxation can be learnt through your knitting and stitching then transferred to other areas of your life. Here, we're going to look at how you can use your knitting and stitching to help you understand and learn pacing skills, making the process less frustrating. We'll also look at some of the other positive side effects.

### Pacing

In Parts two and three we talked about Mindfulness – the process of being aware of yourself and your relationships to others within the present moment. When practising Mindfulness you are aware of unpleasant sensations, such as pain, as well as the pleasant ones. This helps to put pain in its proper place, enabling you to accept and live alongside it. Practising Mindfulness develops an increased

awareness of your body and its sensations which can help you to fine tune your pacing regime, too.

Pacing basically involves finding your own activity levels and limits; knowing what increases your pain and making sure you don't overdo things on some days which will lead to a kick back in pain and enforced inactivity on following days. Exceeding your pacing limit will usually result in enforced rest periods which can last a few days and result in overactivity/underactivity cycles. Pacing is a means of finding a balance between activity and rest that will enable you to remain active every day. It's a useful skill to learn if your energy levels are poor too, and many fibromyalgia and ME sufferers find it can transform their lives.

Knitting and stitching can also help you to understand and manage the frustrations of a pacing regime. We know many of you will identify with what this lady says,

***“Knitting helps me relax when I'm frustrated by the difference between what I want to do and what I am physically capable of in life.”***

Others have told us that knitting or stitching in rest periods helps them 'not to

***“Pacing is a means of finding a balance between activity and rest that will enable you to remain active every day. Your knitting and stitching can help to alleviate the frustrations of enforced rest periods.”***

feel lazy' or not to 'appear lazy'. This helps to ease the tensions and guilt that can arise within relationships when one partner needs to pace life. It also enables you to be productive during enforced rest periods.

For those of you with hand pain, fibromyalgia or ME who may need to pace

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your knitting and stitching, it teaches you that projects get finished just as well when you knit or stitch in 20 minute slots than if you knit for longer periods and are then enforced to take longer

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breaks. That principle applies to most things in life.

It teaches perseverance and patience, too. As one lady told us, **“Learning to pace my knitting has made it easier to work pacing into the rest of my life. Watching something take shape over time has meant that I’m able to understand that things will still be there when I’m ready to do them. It’s taught me that I will have other opportunities. I’ve been able to relax more in my daily life as I learn to do a little each time, knowing that I’ll be able to do more that way. Working with pacing on something where the results are so easily seen has been great training for it. It’s hard to pace when you can’t see the consequences – you**

**just feel like you’re missing out on things. Knitting is a good way to learn that’s not the case.”**

Her words were reinforced by another knitter who suffers from ME and needs to pace her life to maintain stable energy levels. She told us, **“There is just enough concentration needed to provide a distraction from the pain without using too much energy and the rhythmic movements engender a state of meditation.”**

The subject of ‘fun’ and making more time for those activities that improve your personal wellbeing is extremely important. Read about this in more detail in **‘Fun vs Chores’** on the **Health Matters** page of the Stitchlinks website ([www.stitchlinks.com](http://www.stitchlinks.com)). Whether you suffer from chronic pain, depression or other medical conditions, it’s important you put time aside every day for activities that improve your quality of life. Indeed those of us who are fit and well but caught up in a whirl of work and stress should do so too. It helps you discover that all important balance in life and this can give you strength to manage life’s normal ups and downs as well as the stresses and strains which illness can impose.

#### **Time for me**

My experience of those suffering from chronic pain and other long-term illnesses

is that when they cut down their activity levels they cut out those experiences which give them enjoyment – the ones that improve wellbeing and quality of life. You do this because you feel guilty. Perhaps you can no longer work, do the housework, look after the children, so you devote all your available energies to chores – the tasks you feel you ‘ought’ to be doing. Guilt increases if you are ‘seen’ to be enjoying yourselves or ‘being lazy’, taking a break when the chores haven’t been done. This is a common situation in those suffering from ME and fibromyalgia, too.

This results in a life of pain, exhaustion and chores, so feelings of wellbeing and quality of life suffer. In these circumstances it’s easy for pain to dominate. To put

**“To put pain in its place it is important to look after your emotional and mental wellbeing. Schedule some time into every day for doing the things you enjoy simply for the sake of enjoyment itself!”**

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Talk to your partner and family and explain why this is necessary.

You may choose to join a knitting or stitching group. Those living with chronic pain can often feel lonely and isolated from society, so knitting and stitching groups, both real and virtual, can help to maintain and improve social contact and confidence. This is important in keeping your world open and is a great way of meeting people you may never otherwise have the opportunity to meet. Having your stitching in common makes it much easier to begin conversations with strangers.

If you can't get out and about, you could think about start up a knitting and

***“Our Stitchlinks forum enables you to chat freely and openly to others with similar interests and problems around the world. You'll discover you're not alone and soon find your confidence on the rise.”***

stitching group at home. Start by inviting friends and people you know. This can become a therapy in itself as it's good to have an opportunity just to talk to others. It gives another viewpoint on the world.

The internet is another source of communication

with the outside world, so use it to chat to friends. Our Stitchlinks Forum enables you to chat freely and openly to others with similar interests and problems around the world. Many find this very helpful. You'll discover you're not alone and soon find your social confidence rising. This is what one of our Forum members told us, ***“Stitchlinks allowed me to open up again after the long years of dealing with illness and disability on my own had just worn me down and closed me down. Thank you so very much for what you are doing.”***

#### **Mood and pain**

It's known that signals travelling downwards from your brain to an area called the Pain Gate in your spinal column can also influence how much pain you feel. If this 'Gate' is 'open' then danger signals can travel up to your brain. If it is 'closed' then these signals cannot pass, so you won't feel pain.

It has been shown that influences such as a positive mood, your attitude to pain, stress and anxiety can play a part in closing or partially closing this Pain Gate thereby modulating the pain you experience. So it's possible that feeling good whilst you knit or stitch could be having a beneficial effect on your pain in this way too. So make sure you enjoy

some 'Me' time every day, because it really will help.

Knitters and stitchers have developed their own

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ways of dealing with the anticipation of further or more intense pain, too. Research has shown that the more you anticipate and worry about future pain the more intense that pain will be when it arrives. One cross stitcher told me, ***“When I knew I was going into hospital for a major, very painful operation on my spine I bought a very special stitching kit – one I'd been looking forward to for a while. I told myself I would start this when I got into hospital. I found that I was actually looking forward to going in and it took my mind completely off the operation and the pain. As a result the pain was much better than when I'd had a similar operation previously.”*** So if you're waiting for a potentially painful procedure, why not try this out and let me know how you get on?

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Anecdotal evidence is strong that distraction, meditation and relaxation occur naturally as you knit and stitch, but it's our belief that, with a bit of extra knowledge, you can enhance these effects and learn to apply them to specific problems and transfer them to other areas of life.

These processes are quite difficult to learn on their own. It's my belief that knitting and stitching can be used to teach these skills to people who may otherwise find them too difficult to learn. They can also be used to enhance and complement other medical treatments. Their relative low cost and accessibility means that the benefits can be introduced to larger numbers of people as

**“Knitting and stitching can be used to teach specific skills to those who might find them otherwise difficult to learn and to complement medical treatments.”**

effective self help tools. With 7.8 million people in the UK suffering from chronic pain, and just 14% having access to a pain specialist there is an urgent need to find an effective, cost effective, self-management tool, which is easily accessible to everyone. Knitting and stitching open

up an opportunity for those (such as children, people with learning disabilities or the mentally ill) who might otherwise be unable to develop strategies to manage their pain, to do so as part of an enjoyable past-time. They won't need to fully understand the concepts behind the treatments in order to experience and benefit..

### **Self esteem**

A healthy self esteem is so important for dealing with life's normal ups and downs but it becomes even more important if you are managing a long-term medical condition. Many of you tell us that chronic pain makes you feel helpless and worthless in society. You feel guilty at not being able to contribute and this is particularly the case if you've had to give up work. Your knitting and stitching can help raise your self esteem and feelings of self worth in society. We know many of you will identify with what the following three ladies have told us, **“Knitting kept me engaged with pleasure, texture and colour and the belief that I was still an able person even though bits of me didn't work well.” “I could cross stitch and I could do it well. It made it easier to face a world where it seemed I could do nothing right. It's almost like meditation. It seems as though a few**

**minutes a day helps me recharge my batteries.” “You feel as if you can do something after all, you're not completely useless. After a while confidence begins to grow again.”** It's a theme that runs through many letters and emails.

The ability to make gifts and projects for charity can

**“The end product raises self esteem and provides a means of giving gifts which can help to build new positive identities and feelings of belonging to society.”**

raise self esteem further. We've seen from our group at a Pain Management unit how knitting for the hospital's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit gives a sense of purpose to individuals. It also unites the group in a common cause. Some of you take this a step further and develop small businesses as knitters and stitchers for large companies and magazines, hand dyeing yarn, and finding new ways of contributing and earning once more. This fits in with pain, pacing and flare ups and enables you to work around these issues.

### **Think positive**

Negativity, negative thought cycles and lack of motivation in patients pose a huge problem for staff treating those with chronic pain. There is a need to find a

solution which will encourage people to think more positively; to make them feel worthwhile and important in society; to encourage them to start looking forward and feel excitement once again.

### **Refocusing attention**

From the hundreds of stories we've received it appears that knitting and stitching can be used as keys to open up a wider world to people. This then appears to motivate them to becoming more involved in other areas of life. Knitters and stitchers learn that with every stitch you move forward towards your goal. These skills can be transferred across to encourage goal setting and taking small steps to achievement in other areas of life. This knitter speaks for many, ***"If I didn't knit I'm sure I'd be sat wallowing, depressed, consumed by pain and negativity"***.

This takes us full circle back to Distraction (see Part two), which can also work when you're planning future projects enabling a more

***"Occupying your mind in this way stops it focusing inwards on YOU, your pain, your problems and all those negative issues which can make your pain worse."***

generalised refocusing of attention away from pain. The feeling the excitement and anticipation that these thoughts evoke is important because these emotions and

the ability to look forwards can often be forgotten when you suffer from pain day in, day out.

Occupying your mind in this way stops it focusing inwards on YOU, your pain, your problems and all those negative issues and thoughts which can all add up to make your pain worse. All of which can become a vicious downward cycle making the pain you feel worse. This lady said...

***"I took up knitting to take my mind off the pain and depression of infectious arthritis. Without it I would have been concentrating on how miserable and angry I was, which isn't exactly conducive to healing, is it?"***

I've just touched briefly here on some of the ways in which knitting and stitching can help you manage various conditions. These versatile crafts reawaken forgotten skills such as forward thinking and planning, and emotions such as excitement and anticipation. All of which can become lost in the mire or chronic pain and depression.

As we've seen, knitting and stitching can be enjoyed alone, without the need to leave your arm chair, or in a group environment. The benefits of groups are well documented, they can improve communication skills, social confidence and give you a sense of belonging which can be missing from life if you suffer from any long-term illness. Knitting and stitching as

individual activities are enhanced by the group experience, but they also enhance the group benefits. A shared activity can make a group 'work'. The common interest can give those who have low self confidence a reason to attend, it provides an easy, embarrassment free topic of conversation and newcomers are easily integrated. Participants are

***"Knitting and stitching can enhance the benefits of groups. They can make the group 'work', giving a reason to attend and a point of conversation with strangers."***

regarded as 'knitters and stitchers', rather than 'disabled' or 'able bodied' and this helps to rebuild positive identities. Plus, there are the important firm friendships you make, both in face-to-face groups and over the internet.

The internet opens up a whole new world for knitters and stitchers introducing you to other like-minded people across the globe. It also leads to acquiring new skills, such as using computers, posting on forums, taking and uploading photographs as well as writing your own blogs. As you will know the knitting and stitching blogging community is huge. Ideas for new projects and exciting new yarns and needles can be found at a click of a mouse encouraging

creative thought and the further development of skills. For the housebound it has the added benefit of bringing the world to your living room and materials delivered to your doorstep.

### **It all adds up!**

All the above will help widen your horizons, improving your quality of life, helping you to refocus your attention onto creative, constructive thoughts, helping to move pain from the forefront of your mind. In turn, this will help you to better manage your pain, depression and other problems. Of course the portability of knitting and stitching means you have access to these invaluable tools wherever you go.

More recent research has shown that the mind plays a

***“Knitting and stitching are effective tools for managing chronic pain because they enable you to deal with many of the issues that add up to exacerbate your pain.”***

large and important part in how much pain you feel. We believe that issues such as loneliness, social isolation, stress/anxiety, low self esteem and a mind which is left free to ruminate on problems play a large part in increasing the pain experience. Improving these can enable people to manage their pain more effectively and improve quality of life. This is just one

of many similar comments we have received, ***“I am disabled, living with chronic pain. I have recently begun knitting and have had a wonderful change in my mental attitude since finding the benefits of this craft.”***

Knitting and stitching are effective tools for managing chronic pain because they enable you to deal with many of the issues that add up to worsen or improve the pain you actually feel. They are powerful distractors, tools for meditation and relaxation, they improve self esteem, loneliness, and give you back control and a sense of worth in society. They also encourage you to think forwards positively, to feel excitement and anticipation, helping you to build a new, positive sense of identity.

### **Knitting vs Cross Stitch**

Our more recent work has identified that those who knit may do better than those who only cross stitch. There are indications that knitting in this respect is a model craft and it is for this reason our research projects will concentrate initially on knitting. We think the pattern of rhythmic hand movements is important so it may be plausible to argue that a two handed coordinated activity has more impact than a one handed one. Knitting also demands more creative thinking, but at the same time still enables creativity within the safe structure of a pattern, so it provides the

safety often needed by those with low self confidence. However that structure can be withdrawn as skills, confidence and creative ability grow to enable the knitter to hand dye, design and knit items unique to them.

Despite these findings cross stitching remains an important bridge into the

***“There are indications that knitting may be a model craft but that cross stitching may provide a valuable bridge into the creative world.”***

creative world by providing a more rigid structure for those more vulnerable patients or for those who are unable to knit for whatever reason. It is a highly effective means of distraction which can be added to a programme of knitting to manage flare up days, when knitting might just seem like too much.

All of the principles we have discussed in this four part article can be applied to the management of depression, stress, anxiety and a number of other conditions and situations we all meet in everyday life. Think about what you're experiencing as you knit and stitch and examine those feelings then practise recalling those learnt sensations in other situations in your everyday life. After all it's all about achieving wellness and positive living for us all.