

COMMUNICATION & PAIN 2

Living with chronic pain can often affect people's relationships. Having effective ways of communicating can help a lot in learning to live with pain.

How a person with pain communicates with others around him or her is very important. Partners, friends, family and colleagues will have seen you go through the ups and downs of having a chronic pain problem. They will have their own attitudes and ideas about your problem and how you should deal with it. Some people will have very supportive and helpful attitudes and others may be less helpful, or even critical. Many people with pain also find themselves having to communicate with people about benefits, work, medical appointments or legal stuff. This can often be difficult too.

It can be useful to think about how we can communicate clearly with those around us - so that we can get the help and support that we need - and reduce the arguments and misunderstandings that can occur.

What Gets in the Way of Good Communication?

- When we are anxious to speak ourselves
- When we or they are upset/angry/tired
- Arguing or lecturing
- Not wanting to lose an argument/wanting to score points
- Being aggressive or threatening
- Being dogmatic and ordering the other person around
- Not concentrating on the listener, but thinking of our own views
- Judging, criticising or blaming – finger pointing ('you make me feel...')
- Shaming or ridiculing
- Defensiveness, stonewalling or 'the silent treatment'
- Not saying what you really mean – expecting mind reading
- When we think we know what the other person is going to say
- Having unhelpful body language.
- Having interruptions and distractions

Ideas for Good Communication Skills

Remember, good communication is a two way process. We need to be able to express ourselves well and to listen to the other person too. Changing our behaviour can sometimes encourage the other person to be a better communicator too.

- **Guard against communication traps** e.g. being defensive, stonewalling or going silent.
- **Pick a good time to talk.** Don't launch into discussing something when either person is stressed or anxious: Wait for things to cool down first, or arrange a time when you are both more able to spend the time talking, that way both of you can plan what you want to say
- **Reduce distractions** (pick a time when others are out, turn off the TV, take the phone off the hook)
- **Use the 'I' word and avoid 'finger pointing'**. This helps to make the message less accusing and threatening. For example "*I really find it difficult when you walk away and won't listen*" might be easier for the other person to hear than "*You never listen to me anymore*". It encourages them to respond openly rather than backing off or arguing.
- **Be clear** in yourself what you want to communicate and stick to the point.
- **Let others know your preferences** – about how they behave around you and what they do. Don't just assume that they know, or think that they should know! As you are learning more about exercising, relaxation and activity management, you will also need to update them on what you are trying to achieve. Be direct and assertive
 - *If I overdo it, don't tell me 'I told you so' or give me more medication; I prefer it if you just let me figure it out myself'*
 - *'Please let me know clearly when you think I'm overdoing it.'*
 - *'Please let me be the one to ask you when I need help with things. If I don't ask, it's okay to assume that I'm all right'*
 - *I'd prefer it if you just helped me when you see me struggling with...'*
 - *'No, I don't think this will help me. I see your point, but I don't agree about...'*
 - *'Can I please have your help with that as soon as possible?'*
- **Ask for positive feedback**
 - *'Let me know when you see me managing the pain well.'*
 - *'What do you think I'm doing well?'*
- **Give positive feedback**
 - *'When you said/did that, it helped me a lot, thank you. Can you do it again when...?'*
- **Listen.** If you are asking others to listen to you, you must equally pay attention to what they have to say, even if they are angry, 'unreasonable' or defensive. Ask others what your difficulty has been like for them. Try to imagine things from their point of view. This may give you some new ideas about how to do things. It will

also show the other person that you care about them. It's important to *really* listen and try to understand the other person, not just to be thinking about what you are going to say next while the other is speaking. Check out that you've understood what they've said with them by summarising back what you heard, to see if you've got it right. By doing these things, you are also showing the person how you would like them to treat you.

- **Talk about other things besides pain.** Bring your relationships and activities to the foreground. Remember you are a person first, so don't let the pain dominate your conversations.
- **Share information about pain management ideas.** Get you partner/other family members to read the information you have read too.
- **Pay attention to what your body language is saying.** Remember that this is a big part of communication. Think about your posture, your expression, whether you are sitting or standing, having 'open' body language (e.g. not arms crossed), good eye contact (not too much, or too little).
- **Think about your tone of voice**
- **Think carefully about how you are communicating now, and how this became the pattern.** Sometimes, ways of relating and communicating that start off as useful when the pain is new, can become problematic when the pain keeps going. Think about whether you want to carry on like this, or change some things about it