

Spine Care Companion: Module 5

How can I help myself with the challenges of ongoing pain?

This handout is for patients with ongoing back or neck pain. It explains the link between stress and pain, coping strategies, and cognitive-behavioral therapy to manage pain. If your pain has eased, this may not apply to you.

Is it strange that my pain is such a big source of stress?

Certainly not. Back or neck pain is a common source of stress for many people. The effect of pain on daily activities and potential delays in recovery can lead to uncertainty and stress. People tend to imagine the worst-case scenario about their condition, even sometimes believing they will never recover. People often think this way when their pain lasts longer than they or their care team expected.

Stress can also reduce your coping abilities, including the ability to deal with long-lasting spine pain. To help with this, try to find at least one positive thing to look forward to each day.

Schedule times during the day to dedicate to relaxation. Listen to soothing music or nature sounds to help reduce both physical and emotional tension.

I am beginning to wonder if the pain is in my head.

It is best not to blame yourself. Feeling stress and anxiety does not mean that the pain is in your imagination. Stress and pain are linked. Thinking about negative scenarios or outcomes can make your pain worse and interrupt your physical recovery.

The way we think affects the experience of pain, and there are things you can do to help reduce negative thinking. Finding ways to not focus on the pain can reduce its impact in your day-to-day life.

I am really hurting and I feel like nobody is listening to me. What should I do?

Your spine care team is committed to partnering with you on your journey. It is important that you do not feel alone or abandoned as you manage your spine problem. That is why it is important that you are a

engaged member of your spine care team. Please reach out with any concerns or questions.

Your spine care team may include a *clinical psychologist or mental health provider* (such as a therapist or counselor). This specialist is trained to understand the link between pain and stress. They can learn about your unique situation and determine what type of approach or counseling may help you. This is often called *cognitive behavioral therapy* (CBT). CBT supports the other parts of the rehabilitation program.

Someone suggested CBT, but how can that help with physical pain?

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is best known as a treatment for anxiety and depression. However, CBT strategies have been shown to also be useful for improving how people manage the stress, worry, and frustration that can come from living with pain. Learning CBT strategies has been shown to improve functioning and quality of life in people living with pain.

Nothing has worked for me. I feel like I am never going to improve.

Pain is not only a physical experience but also impacts other areas of your life. Fortunately, even if you continue to have pain, there are many ways to adapt your life so that you can still enjoy the things that are important to you. Keep your focus on how you can still do and enjoy activities. This will pay off with a higher quality of life for the long term.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have questions or concerns.