

# MANAGING CHRONIC PAIN

## Practices for heart, mind, spirit, and body

It is unusual for chronic pain to go away completely. But, it is possible to live well with chronic pain.

In this section, we will go over the most helpful things you can do to lower your pain and live your fullest life.

### Finding what works for you can take some time.

It helps to have an open mind and try new things.

Most people find that the best way to manage their chronic pain is by using a combination of wellness practices for the four aspects of well-being (Kanandawi-Bimaatiziwin): heart, mind, spirit, and body.



# Chronic pain is best managed using a combination of practices

Here are some quotes from others in community who shared about how they manage their chronic pain.

*"That's the key right there for arthritis - exercising. Walking, riding a bike."*

*"yeah, uh, that's a biggie...swimming, being in the sun...being in the bush, picking medicines - it's such a healing thing."*

*"Physically I don't have much control over it. Mentally I do. I rely on my culture. I rely on meditation. I rely on things that keep me mentally OK."*



*"Sharing is part of the healing."*

*"...we need to support one another."*

*"...and the ones that I teach is my grandkids... I show them what to do. And...it makes me feel better when I see them do that..."*



# Heart

Inamanji'owin  
(Emotional)

**We need to resolve any negative feelings we may have about ourselves or the people around us.**

When we speak about Heart, we are speaking about emotions, relationships, and communication. We need our heart to guide us to maintain personal balance.

## Getting to know your emotions

We all experience emotions (or feelings) every day, like love, anger, joy, sadness, or guilt. We also carry emotions from things that happened in the past.

For our emotions to be in balance, we need to be aware of what we are feeling and be able to express it. Avoiding or blocking emotions only leads to more pain.

*“what the Elders said to me is – when you hold a lot of pain physically, emotionally - if you hold it in and you don't let it go then it starts to deteriorate the rest of your body.”*

To help reflect on your emotions, try asking yourself:

- What am I feeling right now?
- Where did this feeling come from?
- Why did this feeling come up now?

There are many different ways to express emotions, like talking with someone you trust, writing emotions in a journal or a poem, and making music or art.

*"...feels good inside to let it out  
instead of just keeping it in."*



## Nourishing Relationships

Chronic pain can make you feel lonely and isolated. This is especially true if others don't believe or understand you, or if you can't join in social activities like you used to.

Nobody except you feels exactly what you feel. **But you are not alone.**

We are nourished when we spend time with family, friends, and community members. And they are nourished by our company. Keeping in touch and spending time with others can ease the difficulties of living with chronic pain.

*"...we need to support one another. We need to go and visit one another and talk to each other. And not leave anybody out or alone - because that's where the danger is."*

## Being gentle with yourself

Many times we do not give ourselves the same love and kindness that we give others. You deserve the same patience, love, and compassion you show others.

If you are having a hard day or a day with more pain than usual, take care of yourself. Do something nice for yourself and allow yourself to rest if possible.

## Helping others

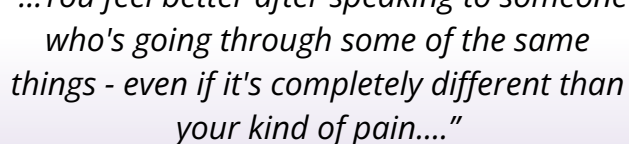
Helping others can be healing. It reminds us that we have gifts and talents, and that sharing them brings joy.

Even simple acts of kindness can bring feelings of connection with others and with our greater purpose. And they can help take the focus off your pain for a little while.

## Connecting with others who live with pain

Connecting with others who live with chronic pain is a great way to learn about new tools, tips, and tricks to lower pain or manage daily activities. You may also learn about clinics, doctors, and healers that may be able to help you.

If you're worried about privacy, try searching for online support groups or forums. You can read and share information there, anonymously.



*"...You feel better after speaking to someone who's going through some of the same things - even if it's completely different than your kind of pain...."*



# Mind

## Inendamowin (Mental)

**We need balance and the healing of mental anguish from childhood to live a healthy life.**

Living with chronic pain is hard, tiring, and it can be frustrating. It affects what we think about and how we think. Chronic pain can be a powerful negative force on our mental health.

*“the pain could really narrow your eyesight, your focus. You know, it's like somebody wearing blinders because that's where your focus is. And it's hard to get out [of] your mind - out of that pain-centered living.”*

There are different ways that can help manage difficult thoughts when they come up.

Sometimes we may become so used to thinking a certain way about pain that we don't even realize we are doing it. Or we may not know how to stop it or change it.

But thoughts are not facts. Calming the mind and the body can be a helpful first step to managing difficult thoughts.

## Relaxation and breathing techniques

Relaxation can help you calm the mind, loosen muscle tension, reduce stress, and increase feelings of well-being. It can also help you sleep better and give you more energy.

You can try it on your own by gently focusing on the flow of your breathing. Find a comfortable position for your body and take slow deep breaths. Focus on the flow of the breath as you inhale and exhale at a comfortable pace.



## Mindfulness practices

Mindfulness practices are about learning to focus on the present moment without judgment. This includes noticing your breath and body sensations as being there just as they are. Mindfulness can also help you relax the body and calm the mind.

**To get started, try listening to a recording of a guided relaxation or mindfulness meditation. Many free recordings are available online.**



## Focusing on the things that matter to you

Chronic pain can make it hard to do things like you used to. This can be tough to accept.

Think of what matters most, like family, friends, activities you love, or meaningful work. Try to find ways you can still engage with these people and activities. What are small steps you can take to enjoy these parts of life?

## Getting support for mental health

Talking to someone who is trained to support you can help a lot when you feel distressed. It is one of the best things anyone can do for their mental health.

Mental health professionals like psychologists, counselors, and psychotherapists use talk therapy. It can help you examine your life and learn new coping skills.

*"...that psychological treatment should be an asset for our First Nations because you gotta release what's up here because it has control on our emotions and our physical being."*

*"one of the things is... with us, is - it's hard to talk about ourselves and how we feel - because it's painful. So, I really understand that... um - but we do need to. It's, it's so healing when we do."*

If you have a lot of distress and are struggling to cope, it may help to talk to a mental health professional or a trusted and respected Elder.

See Page 69 in the "Resources" section for a list of contacts to reach out to for mental health support.





# Spirit

## Manaandaawan (Spiritual)

**We need to accept our momentary place on this earth and look to a higher spiritual being for understanding and destiny.**

Attending to spirit brings many benefits. Spiritual practices can remind us of our connection to all other relations past, present, and future. Nurturing spiritual connections can bring feelings of belonging and peace.

Even if you don't think of yourself as "spiritual", there are practices you can do to strengthen this part of yourself.

You may find that doing spiritual practices is comforting. It brings perspective and helps you accept things beyond your control.

*"Each one of us has a responsibility to get in touch with the creator or God or Buddha or however you pray - you need that connection otherwise you're lost. ...you know, somebody's looking after each one of us... And how you do that is entirely up to you..."*

## Practicing being grateful

Feeling grateful does not always come easily. We may have to practice looking for what brings us joy or pleasure.

To encourage feelings of gratitude, try writing down one thing you are grateful for each day. Or try writing a thank you note to someone who has been helpful or kind.

Remember that the things you are grateful for may be big (like your loved ones) or small (like a sunny day). This practice brings the most benefit when done regularly.

## Connecting with your culture

Connecting with your culture can be a source of great power and healing. Joining in cultural activities in your community, learning or practicing your ancestral language, or learning a new skill like drumming or beading can help you grow and connect with others.

If you have not been a part of these activities much in the past, you may feel shy or worried about joining now. But it is never too late to try new things.



You can also ask a friend or family member to join you if you don't want to go alone.

Check out your local or regional community centres and Facebook pages for upcoming events. As a bonus, many events have food and prizes available. You never know what you may gain by just showing up!

## Prayer

Praying is another way to connect with something bigger than yourself, sometimes referred to as “a higher power”. Prayer can help bring a new perspective, focus on gratitude, and accept things outside of your control.

For many people, praying brings feelings of release, hope, peace, and calm. You can pray any time, anywhere. You can pray out loud or silently and for a short or longer time. There is no right or wrong way to pray.

## Traditional healing and wellness practices

Traditional healing and wellness practices include many things like: ceremony, traditional medicines and foods, songs, dance, smudging, brushings, hunting and gathering, fasting, etc.

Traditional healing also includes seeking help from a traditional healer. They can help you heal a broken spirit, ill body, or keep well.



If you don't know about traditional healing practices but want to learn, ask a trusted person to share their experience or suggest resources.

*"I see that everywhere I go – in Native communities. The power of family and the power of home and our ancestors."*

*"Wellness is remembering who we are - what it means to be Anishinaabe"*



# Body

## Wiiyow (Physical)

**Our being needs to be given the proper rest, exercise, food and water if we wish to be healed.**

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Taking care of your body is important when you have chronic pain. But chronic pain can make it hard to do that.

You may hesitate to move around when things hurt. Or you may have trouble sleeping and have low energy.

The good news is there are many different strategies you can try. And it's ok to try things out in small steps!

## Movement for pain relief

One of the best ways to manage pain is through movement and physical activity. There are many different ways to make movement part of your day. A good way to start is by adding a bit more movement to your daily activities.

Here are some things to try:

- gentle arm and leg stretches while sitting
- moving around the house to your favourite music
- parking the car a bit farther from a store entrance
- doing some light chores inside or outside the house

Activities can be done alone, with a friend, or in a group. The most important thing is to find an activity that you enjoy doing. It's ok to start small and add a few minutes of movement each week, at your own pace.

Here are some activities that can help with chronic pain:

- gentle stretching or yoga
- walking
- dancing
- light gardening
- swimming
- strengthening muscles with small weights



## Getting professional help with movement

Physiotherapists or occupational therapists are movement professionals. They work with you to find the activities and movements that support your body best.

**Physiotherapy** helps improve your movement, mobility, and function. A physiotherapist may do this using manual therapies, stretches, or exercises.

**Occupational therapy** helps you perform daily activities (like bathing and getting dressed). An occupational therapist helps you more easily keep your independence. They also help make your home environment better for your everyday life.

## Physical strategies to ease pain

Here are some things that have helped people in your community manage their pain:

- applying a hot or a cold pack to the painful area
- electrical stimulation machine (TENS machine)
- getting a massage
- getting acupuncture
- seeing a chiropractor

## Pacing yourself to prevent flare-ups

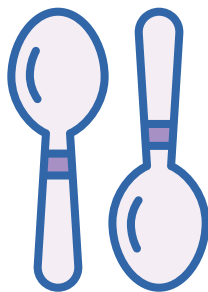
Chronic pain often comes and goes. On a good day you may feel like you should catch up on things. But then you may overdo it and the pain flare-ups afterwards.

To avoid this “boom and bust” cycle, it’s important to take breaks even when you feel like you can keep going.

Pacing involves breaking activities into smaller chunks and taking breaks in-between to avoid overdoing it.

People often talk about having a certain number of spoonfuls of energy per day. With activity, these spoonfuls get used up.

Through pacing, you can divide your spoonfuls of energy for the day by balancing activity and rest. This way you can get some things done each day without the fear of pain getting worse the next day.



Knowing your limits and balancing your energy each day can help you keep an active life despite pain.



## Food is medicine for chronic pain

Keeping the body well-nourished is important for general health. It can also affect how your pain feels. But, it is not always easy to eat nutritious meals.

Colonial systems have made fresh and nutritious food hard to get or too expensive. Colonial policies have also disrupted Traditional food practices, like growing, gathering, hunting, and preserving food.

The best approach to eating well is to balance suggestions for nutritious foods with what is practical for you and your family.

Here are some practical tips for nutritious meals:

- By making your own meals at home, you can control how much sugar, salt, and oil or fat is in your food.
- When preparing meals at home, make extra portions to freeze and eat at a later time.
- Frozen fruits and veggies are as nutritious as fresh.
- Drink water throughout the day and try to eat foods with lots of water in them, like soups and fruits.

## Some foods increase inflammation

Many kinds of chronic pain come with **inflammation**. It's your body's natural response to protect and heal itself. Inflammation can make your pain feel worse. Some foods increase inflammation while others reduce inflammation.

### Foods that can increase inflammation:

- fried foods (French fries, potato chips)
- sugary drinks (pop)
- processed meat (hot dogs, sausages, lunch meats)

### Foods that can reduce inflammation:

- green leafy vegetables like spinach and kale
- fruits like berries, apples, peaches, and cherries
- nuts like almonds and walnuts
- fatty fish like salmon, mackerel, tuna, and sardines

## The benefits of traditional foods

Eating traditional foods can also help you stay healthy and manage pain. Traditional foods, like berries, fish, game meat, or wild rice are rich in nutrients. And eating these foods can help reduce inflammation and ease pain.

Eating traditional foods is also an opportunity to share traditional knowledge and practices.

Reclaiming traditional diets is a way to be more food secure. And it helps to prevent and treat chronic pain.



**Find a link to the Traditional Food Guide on page 68 in the "Resources" section.**



## Sleep well to manage pain

Good quality sleep is important for well-being and helps with managing pain. But, getting enough good quality sleep can be hard when you live with chronic pain.

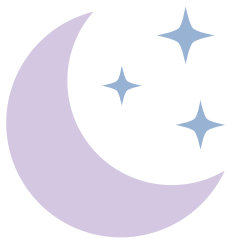
When pain shows up, it can make it hard to fall asleep and it can wake you up at night.

Fortunately, there are things you can do to improve your sleep.



Here are some things that may help you sleep better:

- go to bed and wake up around the same time each day
- read a book or have a bath before bed to relax
- try relaxation exercises before bed, like a guided meditation or listening to soothing music
- do some physical activity during the day
- avoid having a heavy meal or things with caffeine (coffee, tea, cola, chocolate) close to bedtime



It may take a bit of time and patience to figure out the best sleep time routine for you, so take it easy on yourself.

If you are not able to sleep, your body can still take advantage of this time to rest.

## Pain medicines

There are different types of Western pain medicines that you can get over-the-counter at the pharmacy.

If you prefer to avoid Western medicines, there are traditional medicines that can ease pain.

Seek the advice of a trusted and respected healer in your community to learn more about traditional ways to relieve pain.



The most commonly used Western pain medicines are called anti-inflammatory medications. They help to reduce inflammation and help to relieve pain. These medications that you are probably familiar with are:

- Aspirin
- Acetaminophen (e.g., Tylenol)
- Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)
  - ibuprofen (Advil)
  - naproxen sodium (Aleve)
  - celecoxib (Celebrex)



There are also creams, gels, and salves for pain relief that you can buy at the pharmacy or order online. Speak to your pharmacist to find out which over-the-counter medication and pain relief products are right for you.

If over-the-counter medications don't help with your pain, talk to a doctor about prescription pain medications.

See the section on “Medical Care for Chronic Pain” starting on page 52 to find out more.

# Pain stories

Managing pain is unique to each person. Read about some ways that people in GCT#3 communities manage pain. These are real stories summarized to focus on key points and to protect privacy.



## **Managing osteoarthritis and severe back pain**

I try to learn about herbals and medicines from the bush. I also read on the internet (for example, on Facebook) about what different foods do for your body and health (like berries, pineapple). I have a person that I talk to every month - to get all that stuff out. I also stay active by walking. And I avoid extreme cold - it makes my back spasm. If that happens, I take a hot bath.



## **Managing arthritis all over the body**

Some days I can barely even walk. But I keep on fighting and trying to be strong. I try to smile, I try to make people happy. I do whatever I can to help and advocate for other people and for animals. I use my cane and I use massagers at home. I went to see a medicine man - the medicines and guidance he gave me have helped me out the most.



## **Managing back injuries after a car accident in their youth**

I used to take Tylenol 3s for a long time. But I had to stop using them when I got pregnant and I didn't want to start using them again after... Now I see a physiotherapist and what has helped me the most is exercise, especially stomach exercises to support my back. I also use hot and cold pads, salves like tiger balm, and I drink a lot of teas. I also use a TENS machine when I have a flare up.

So now I only go the natural route. Even when I've gone in for surgeries, I turn down medications they prescribe me. I would just rather not take them. I know that if things get bad, that option is always there, but for now I just stick with what I know.



## **Managing chronic pain using different Traditional medicines**

Going to the sweat lodge is a huge thing for me - it's a cleansing process and it targets everything, every part of you. I do a lot of walking and I do yoga. I use crystals and candles. I smudge. I've tried seeing a massage therapist, acupuncturist, reiki, chiropractor. Even just sitting with someone who knows about Traditional medicines - that's a biggie. I go swimming. I like to be in the sun, in nature, being in the bush and picking medicines. It's such a healing thing.

As soon as I start to get any feelings of sadness, I get up and I move. I make a medicine bag or smudge or sit with my tobacco and release what I'm feeling. I have learned how to honour myself and honour my body.



## **Managing back injury and trauma from residential school**

The Elders helped take care of me and taught me about some of the medicines.

I went to a lot of sweats, ceremonies and healing - that also helped me a lot. For my back pain, I try to stay active and eat healthy - lots of fruits and vegetables and do whatever I can to take care of my body. I quit smoking. I saw a massage therapist. I try to remember what the Elders taught me and try to find a balance. I try to find what feels good for me.



## **Managing chronic pain and mental health issues**

Before I could even deal with my pain, I had to take care of my mental health.

I did a lot of cultural things like going out in the bush, going to the water. Then, when I felt strong enough I started to listen to my body. I knew I had to lose weight. So now I walk every day, for an hour. I've lost 60 pounds already. My walking time is my time - my thinking time, my wellness time. Another thing I tried was talking to my doctor about cannabis use. I've also tried melatonin and turmeric and other anti-inflammatory things. I try different things - it's like an experiment thing for me. And I quit smoking.



# Actions for Heart and Mind

## HEART ACTIONS to Manage Pain:

- Spend time with family
- Call a friend
- Attend community events
- Visit with community members
- Make music or art
- Find an online support group or forum
- Support someone in your community
- Be gentle on yourself
- Write down your emotions in a journal

## MIND ACTIONS to Manage Pain:

- Bring calm to the mind and body
- Relaxation, deep breathing
- Mindfulness practice
- Focus on the things that matter to you
- Learn about and use stress management techniques
- Talk to a psychologist, mental health therapist, counselor, or a trusted and respected Elder



# Actions for Spirit and Body

## **SPIRIT ACTIONS to Manage Pain:**

- Offer tobacco
- Pray
- Participate in Ceremony
- Practice gratitude
- Talk to a trusted Elder or Traditional Healer
- Drum, sing
- Connect with the land and water
- Learn or practice your ancestral language
- Take part in a cultural activity or event

## **BODY ACTIONS to Manage Pain:**

- Movement, physical activity (exercise, dancing, stretches, yoga, physiotherapy, occupational therapy)
- Physical ways to relieve pain (hot or cold packs, massage, chiropractor, acupuncture, electrical stimulation machine)
- Nutrition (nourishing food, traditional foods, avoiding foods that cause inflammation)
- Sleep and rest (relaxation practices, pacing yourself)
- Medicines (Tylenol, Advil, muscle relaxants, creams, salves, Traditional medicines)





# Setting goals

Setting goals can help you take steps towards doing the things that matter most to you.

To start setting your goal for living well, ask yourself:

- ~ What is most important to me?
- ~ What would I like to do more of?
- ~ What would I like to improve?
- ~ How can I balance heart, mind, body, and spirit?

Some common goals include taking care of yourself, spending more quality time with family, participating in community activities or hobbies, or getting back to work.

*"But each day, I kept pushing myself. One minute...I did 10 steps. Another week, I was already going down the steps. Next week, I was going down... by the road. Each day I...was determined. You know, I kept making those... goals for myself."*





## TIPS for goal setting

Setting goals for living well will help you stay motivated and track your progress.

The easiest way to achieve your goals is to start small. You may need to break down a big goal into smaller goals or steps.



A good way to start is by setting “SMART” goals. Here is an example of turning a general goal into a SMART goal:



**General goal:** *My goal is to walk more.*



**SMART goal:** *My goal is to be able to walk from my house to my grandson's house at the other side of the reserve by the end of the summer (in three months).*

Next, you can start to plan HOW you will achieve your goal. You can plan WHAT actions you will do, WHEN you will do them, and for how long.

**WHAT I will do:** *I will walk outside for 5 minutes every day for two weeks. Then I will walk for 10 minutes every day for two week.*

**WHEN I will do this:** *I will walk in the morning after breakfast.*

Next, think about what will help you achieve your goal and what may get in your way. Here are some examples:

**WHAT will help me:** *I will invite a friend to walk with me. I will get a good pair of walking shoes.*

**WHAT may get in the way:** *If the weather is bad, I will walk around inside the house.*

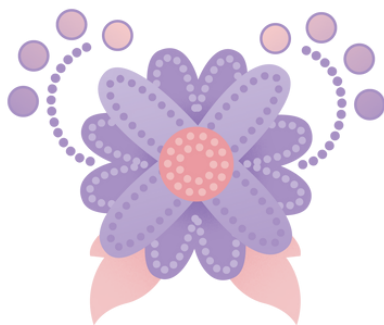
Your goals may change over time.

If you have a goal that you tried but did not yet achieve, you may need to change it. You could try making the goal smaller, giving yourself more time to achieve it, or changing the steps needed to achieve the goal.

It's ok if progress is slow. Every small step towards a goal is worth celebrating.

It's helpful to review your goals and your progress towards your goals with your healthcare provider.

You are the expert on your pain and what feels right for you. You know best what is important to you, what is possible for you to achieve, and what common things can get in your way.





# Taking each day as it comes

It is common for chronic pain to flare up or feel worse on some days than others.

Sometimes you may know the reason why (like bad weather or overdoing it), but other times you may not. If you are having a worse pain day, it is helpful to remember that this is normal and it will pass.

It can be helpful to make a plan ahead of time for worse pain days.

Try making a list of things that helped you feel better in the past or were a good distraction from how you were feeling. Here are some things that often help others:

- hot or cold pack
- soothing music or guided relaxation
- warm shower or bath
- distracting book, movie, or game
- talking with a friend or a loved one

Having a plan to cope with worse pain days can give you peace of mind and might even help prevent a bad flare up.