People with chronic (long-standing) pain or fatigue often have altered levels of activities as a result of their symptoms. This might affect all different types of activities, including work, household tasks, exercise, hobbies and thinking/concentration tasks.

1. **Boom-bust cycle (under-activity to over-activity)**

Some people over-do activities on ‘good’ days when their symptoms are lower or when they feel they have a lot of tasks to complete. This can lead to an increase in pain or other symptoms (a setback). During a setback, people describe ‘bad days’ when they need a period of rest or lower activity. After a recovery period, people tend to over-do activities again. This pattern of high and low activities (**under-activity to over-activity**) is called the **boom-bust cycle**. People often say that they feel better on a ‘good day’ due to a sense of achievement. People tend to feel worse on a ‘bad day’ and frustrated that they are unable to do their activities. In this way, the boom-bust cycle can affect our thoughts and emotions. The boom-bust cycle can make people feel that they are no longer in control of their activities, but instead they feel that their symptoms are in control. Unfortunately, people may notice that the bust-bust cycle leads to a reduction in their activity levels over time. Some people start to think that they cannot do activities, or that certain activities are harmful and should be avoided.

**Boom-bust cycle**

![Boom-bust cycle diagram](image-url)
2. Excessive persistence (over-doing activities)
Other people find that they try to continue a high level of activities and push through their symptoms at an excessive level. This pattern of over-doing activities is called excessive persistence (over-doing). Many people who over-do their activities for a sustained period may experience a sudden or sharp decline in their activities. Some people maintain high levels of over-doing activities for months or years before this decline. Other people may work at extreme levels in the week, only to spend their weekend recovering. This can be physically and emotionally tiring and people with excessive persistence may report an overall decrease in activities over time.

Excessive persistence (over-doing activities)

3. Avoidance (under-activity)
Other people have generally low levels of activities in comparison to what they used to be able to do and would like to do. This lower level of activities may be due to a number of reasons, for example, some people may be trying to avoid having a setback of symptoms, and perhaps feel fearful of activities that have previously triggered a setback. They may be unable to undertake or maintain certain activities due to lower tolerance, strength or endurance that has occurred over time. This pattern of low activity (under-doing) may be seen as an avoidance type of behaviour, and their levels of activity may decline further over time.
Avoidance behaviour (Under-doing activity)

All of the above patterns of behaviour (boom-bust, over-activity and avoidance) can lead to overall lower levels of activity and distress during setbacks. Activity pacing is a strategy that can help to improve boom-bust, over-activity and avoidance behaviours.

How can using activity pacing help to change behaviours?

Activity pacing can help you to:

- Reduce fluctuations (extreme highs and lows) in activity levels
- Reduce the frequency and severity of setbacks
- Undertake previously avoided activities and confront fearful beliefs
- Set goals of achievable levels of activity
- Try various activities and activities that are meaningful to you
- Create more ‘good days’ and fewer ‘bad days’

What are the longer-term benefits of pacing?

Over time, activity pacing may help you to:

- Accept and enjoy your achievements in activities
- Increase your confidence that you can manage your symptoms
- Reduce fear of activities, or avoidance behaviours
- Reduce disability, improve your mood and sense of control
- Enable more regular activities and increase activity levels over time
**Activity Pacing**

Why do some people find activity pacing difficult?

People may struggle to pace their daily activities due to a number of reasons. For example, some people set themselves rigid goals of what has to be achieved. Such people may struggle to prioritise themselves or their own needs. They may struggle to show themselves self-compassion/self-care and they may not be used to allowing flexibility with activities. For some people, changing their approaches to activities may involve difficult changes to life-long habits or expectations of themselves. Other people may struggle to pace their activities due to external factors such as demands placed on them by work, family or other commitments.

Try to consider anything that might prevent you from pacing your activities and to address these barriers as able. It is important that pacing does not feel too rigid, disruptive or restrictive. Allow flexibility with your activities. There may be some days/activities when you choose not to pace. Make sure that you set achievable goals since pacing is not about feeling guilty if you do not complete something. The best way to start pacing is to think about what your current pattern of activities looks like. A good way to do this is by completing an **activity diary**.
Activity diaries
Try to complete an activity diary to find out how your current activity levels vary across the week. You might notice that you have generally quite low levels of activity or that you avoid certain activities (avoidance pattern). Or, you might notice that you have very high levels of activities and then experience sudden setbacks (excessive persistence). You might also notice that you have a boom-bust pattern of activities.

On the activity diary, write down the severity of your symptoms during some your different activities. You can score your pain/fatigue levels out of 10 where 0=no pain/fatigue and 10=maximum pain/fatigue. Think about what affects your levels of activity, how your activity levels make you feel and how you think you could regulate your activity levels. There is an example of a completed activity diary on the second page of the diary.

Part II of the activity pacing handout will help you to start pacing your activities.