

## Self-Observation of Pain Triggers Exercise Instructions

A variety of factors may contribute to the development of an episode of significantly increased pain. Such factors might include: Physical activity (too much or too little); Inadequate sleep; Diet (consumption of pro-inflammatory foods and/or Nightshades); Excessive consumption of alcohol or other unhealthy substances; Emotional stress (relationship, work, financial, too much to do, etc.), or any of a variety of other factors.

Awareness of the role such factors may play in your episodes of significantly increased pain can help you prevent such episodes from occurring. To develop this awareness you will need to start paying attention to the events in your life which seem to precede episodes of increased pain. Once you have a good grasp of what those factors are, if you approach your daily activities with mindful awareness you can use that knowledge to identify *early warning signs* of an impending episode of significantly increased pain and use the pain management skills you are learning to reduce the likelihood of future episodes of increased pain from occurring.

I invite you to explore this pain management strategy (*mindful self-observation*) by using the forms on the following pages to make some notes about the next few episodes of significantly increased pain which you experience.

Try to approach this exercise with *Beginner's Mind*. In other words, try to be open-minded and to consider the possible role of other factors in addition to the role of physical activity. Note every possible factor that may have contributed to increased pain. You may discover that factors you have not seriously considered in the past actually play a very large role in causing increased pain. Only by being open-minded to the possibility that stress, sleep, diet, consumption of unhealthy substances, and other non-physical factors might contribute to your episodes of significantly increased pain will you be able to identify and to begin to prevent any contribution which they may make.

Before you begin this exercise let me be clear about what I mean by ***episode of significantly increased pain***. We all experience some degree of increased pain or even unusual and new pain as a result of minor injury, illness, formal exercise, physical therapy, or otherwise using muscles that we are not accustomed to using. When we experience this type of increased pain or discomfort, if it is not severe, this is not what we are referring to as an episode of significantly increased pain. Although admittedly a bit arbitrary, perhaps a useful gauge or metric to use in determining what constitutes an episode of significantly increased pain is when your pain increased 2 or more points above your everyday baseline level of pain on the 0 to 10 pain scale. So, for example: If your baseline level of pain is a 5, an episode of significantly increased pain would occur when your pain level goes as high as 7 or if your baseline level of pain is a 4 an episode of significantly increased pain would occur when your pain level goes as high as 6.

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Once you have made some notes about what was going on in your life during the several days prior to a number of episodes of increased pain you can then look back over those notes to see if there are any patterns or unique or unusual events that give you increased insight in to factors which might be contributing to your episodes of increased pain. If you notice such patterns or unique or unusual events you will then be in a position, if you use mindful awareness of your daily activities, to notice those sorts of factors when they are occurring and to take steps to prevent them from contributing to future episodes of increase pain.

Perhaps a couple of examples would be helpful.

### *Example #1:*

If you notice that you consistently engage in excessive physical activity during the days prior to an episode of increased pain you can use the skill of *Mindful Awareness of Daily Activities* to notice when you are starting to engage in excessive physical activity and you can then also use your knowledge of the pain management skill of *Activity Pacing* to more effectively pace that physical activity.

### *Example #2:*

If you notice that you were experiencing a lot of stress associated with your relationships with family members or other people during the days prior to the development of one or more episodes of increased pain, you can use several pain management skills to prevent such interpersonal stress from contributing to increased pain in the future: You can use the pain management skill of *Mindful Awareness of Daily Activities* to notice when you are experiencing such increased interpersonal stress. You can use the pain management skill of *Mindful Awareness of Muscle Tension* to notice whether or not you are experiencing increased muscle tension as a result of the stressful situation. You can use the pain management skill of *Cue-Controlled Relaxation* to reduce your muscle tension at such times. You can use the pain management skill of *Embracing Healthy Attitudes* (non-judgmental, non-reactive, awareness of what is happening in the present moment) to maintain your composure, both physically and emotionally during such stressful situations. You can use the pain management skills of *Active Listening* and *Assertive Communication* to negotiate the difficult interpersonal situation in a healthy and productive way. And, you can use the pain management skill of *Quieting* (formal practice of relaxation or meditation) once you are no longer in the stressful situation to help return your levels of muscle tension and emotional arousal to normal or baseline levels.

## Pain Triggers Self-Observation Exercise Worksheet

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_  
The date you began to experience the increase pain

**Time:** \_\_\_\_\_  
The time of day that you noticed your pain had increased

**Note any unusual circumstances during the several days preceding the increased pain**

Physical Activities: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Diet: \_\_\_\_\_

Sleep: \_\_\_\_\_

Consumption of unhealthy substances: \_\_\_\_\_

Stressful events or circumstances: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Other possible contributing factors: \_\_\_\_\_  
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