

# Tools for recovery – Boom or bust vs pacing

## The problem part 1

Boom and bust. This phrase describes a common cycle with those living with pain. When you are on a good day and want to catch up with stuff and push too hard, or perhaps you are forced by life circumstance to do more than normal, do you crash for several days? That is the boom-and-bust cycle.

The boom bust cycle not only creates more frequent flare ups of pain, but it also leads to lower and lower activity tolerance over time. This decrease in activity tolerance is limits your ability to engage in life in a meaningful way. Learning when and how to pace and balancing that with strategic pushing (more activity than normal) is a critical skill in self-management of and overall improvement of pain.

The concept of pacing is based upon setting activity priorities for your day and or week, then addressing these priorities the same way you eat an elephant, one bite at a time. Pacing by my definition means planning your activity needs for the day then taking a break ***before*** you are forced to by the pain.

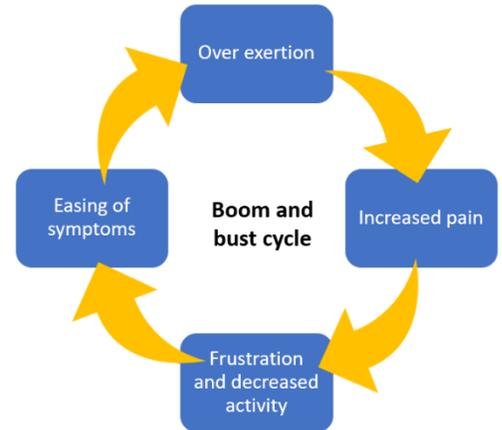
Let's see how this might look with a common example. Vacuuming is often a painful activity for many living with pain. One common but poor strategy is to vacuum the entire house despite the pain then rest for a day or more until you feel back to your baseline level of pain. Sometimes, you cannot even finish the house because the pain becomes too intense!

A pacing strategy is quite different. Let's say that you have a baseline pain level of 6/10. You know from experience that you can vacuum for about 5 minutes before the pain begins to build. To pace that activity, you should stop at about 2 ½ minutes and rest up a bit before you continue to vacuum for another 2 ½ minutes and so on. This technique will seem frustratingly slow, but it is actually much faster when you add the work and rest time together. Because you will rest much less this way because the pain will not build up. Working like the tortoise will allow you to avoid running into the wall like the hare.

A major problem with this strategy is that those who might find value in this strategy will also find it challenging to accomplish. The mental strain of always working to be perfect, to strategize and prioritize is difficult when you are in a brain fog from the pain or the meds. The struggle to be perfect can be harmful and lead to self-shaming. Self-compassion is really important and really hard for some.

An additional problem is that while always avoiding the pain sounds good, not pushing yourself in a strategic manner will lower your activity tolerance. You will need to push at times both to improve your tolerance but also to improve your ability to engage with life.

## The problem part 2

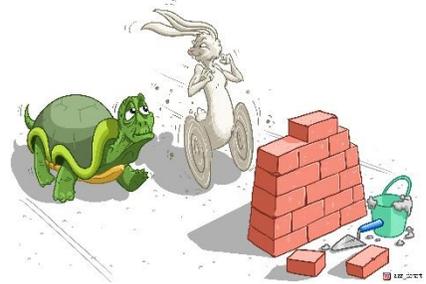


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We all know that exercise is important for general health and wellness. Exercise builds physical capacity to be more fit for the physical challenges that we all face. It also gives us the reserve capacity and the confidence that we are capable of dealing with any unexpected challenges that we might face.

For those who are living with pain exercise can be intimidating. Even the thought of exercise can increase pain intensity in some folks. So, despite knowing how important exercise is for health, it can be almost impossible to perform for many who live with pain.

It may be useful for you to view pain as a component of a system that is working hard to protect your body. That system is anticipatory of potential damage as well as reactive to actual damage. Part of that system is inflammatory (immune function), part is respiratory, part is nervous system, and part muscular. The pain that we feel as a result of being caught in a boom-and-bust cycle is generally anticipatory (meaning that it occurs before any new tissue damage) and the resulting activation of the boom-and-bust cycle is that the sensitivity for triggering that system increases over time. At least in this situation, it can be said that pain will occur when you do too much after doing too little for too long.



Remember, constant pacing will gradually lead to decreased tolerance of activity. If you want to increase your capacity for activity, you will need to push at times as well. So, how to push without falling back into a boom-and-bust cycle?

## **One solution: Paring activity/exercise with active physiological calming**

If the goal of exercise to maintain or improve your physical capacity the goal of physiological calming is to calm the bodily protective system. If you are deconditioned or are living in pain, exercise will trigger the bodily protective system mentioned above. However, combining these techniques should allow you to have the best of both. This skill recognizes that too much activity will ramp up the protection system, so it makes sense to practice ramp that system back down.

**Pain will occur when you do too much, too soon, after doing too little, for too long.**

So, first, what is physiological calming?

Physiological calming is anything that is calming or soothing to you. Anything that is soothing will ramp the protective system down. Rest is calming but may take too long. Learning to actively calm your protective system puts you in control of your life! Remember that the bodily protective system includes respiration, muscle, cardiac, and nervous systems. Actively slowing your breathing is a physiological calming technique. Even smiling is a physiological calming technique.

There are several techniques that help. The most common is a breathing exercise or singing. Some folks do well with distraction, some with a different movement. Whatever the choice is, practicing this technique is incredibly useful.

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As someone living with pain, you will need to experiment with a variety of physiological calming techniques to trial to find the one(s) that suit you best. You need to have confidence that if the pain begins to build, that you will be able to calm it down again, **actively**. Not with rest, nor massage or hot packs. Actively, by yourself. This is the skill that should give you the confidence to engage in the exploration needed to increase your physical capacity.

## Putting it together

To put this together you select an activity that is designed to challenge the pain system, but not too much. Use the Goldilocks principle here. Just enough to be challenging and useful but not so much as to flare up the pain. This activity should also be related to some truly meaningful goal that you are working toward. If the goal activity is vacuuming the house because a dirty home spikes your anxiety, then the exercise activity could include some component of the actions involved in vacuuming. If golfing is the goal activity, be sure to include some twisting of the trunk and some impact loading similar to golf. **This activity should be painful but at a level that you feel is acceptable and are willing to experience.** The variables of the exercise to keep track of are the time, and intensity as measured by rate of perceived exertion. It will take some experimentation to find the correct dosage.

Next, select the calming activity. Singing is great as it is generally enjoyable and provides automatic diaphragmatic breathing. The dosage of the calming activity is noted by time. Distraction activities such as adult coloring books, word finding, or reading poems or scripture aloud also work well.

Let's assume that the meaningful goal is to pick up and carry a newborn grandchild. An example might be to lift a 5 lb. bag of flour from a chair height and carrying it in the crook of the left arm for 3 min while walking around the house with an RPE of 4/10. In this hypothetical situation the pain intensity would rise from a 3/10 to a 4/10 which is a tolerable increase for you. This could be followed by a breathing exercise, or singing x 2 min. The symptoms should be back to baseline by the end of the calming phase of the exercise. Then repeat as often as tolerated. Many variables can be adjusted to make the activity more or less challenging depending on how you are progressing.

Building tolerance to activity by pushing without falling into a boom-and-bust cycle is well tolerated by almost everyone and is a significant part of moving forward.

RPE Scale (Rate of Perceived Exertion)	
1	<b>Very Light Activity</b> (anything other than complete rest)
2-3	<b>Light activity</b> (feels like you can maintain for hours, easy to breath and carry on a conversation)
4-5	<b>Moderate Activity</b> (feel like you can exercise for long periods of time, able to talk and hold short conversations)
6-7	<b>Vigorous Activity</b> (on the verge of becoming uncomfortable, short of breath, can speak a sentence)
8-9	<b>Very Hard Activity</b> (difficult to maintain exercise intensity, hard to speak more than a single word)
10	<b>Max Effort</b> (feels impossible to continue, completely out of breath, unable to talk)

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