

TOP 10 TIPS

FOR EXPLAINING YOUR PAIN TO OTHERS

A majority of people who have pain look fine on the outside. But for those who have pain, you know it can literally take your breath away and steal away precious moments.

Because other people can't see your pain, they probably have a hard time understanding it. Without understanding, it's difficult to show compassion. In the worst of cases, someone might brush off your "complaints" of pain as just that or perhaps doubt that you are hurting.

If this sounds familiar, you're not alone. Describing pain to others — whether they are family members, friends, colleagues or even health care providers — is among the biggest (and most frustrating) challenges reported by people living with pain.

So how can you best explain the grip pain can have on you? While pain scales are useful, try talking about your pain in terms of function. What can or can't you do because of it? Remember, pain doesn't just limit you physically. It can also interfere with your emotions, relationships and general well-being.

Here are some tips that might help:

- 1. Use specific, descriptive words.** Choose your language carefully to paint a vivid picture of how your pain feels. Is your pain dull, throbbing or nagging? Does it feel like a knife that is stabbing you or is the affected area hot like it's on fire? Compare it to other types of injuries or pains that your friends and family have experienced (It's worse than a broken bone, labor, toothache, etc.).
- 2. Talk about the triggers.** What makes your pain worse? Perhaps it hurts more when you move your body in a certain way (for example, when twisting to put on your seat belt, bending down to tie your shoelaces or reaching to get something off a tall shelf). Are there certain times of the day or environments that cause your pain to flare up?
- 3. Name activities (at work, home and play) you now avoid.** Pain can make it nearly impossible to do certain things. For example, maybe you can no longer play catch with your dog, sit through a movie with a friend, garden or play a sport or musical instrument. Also, because pain can be unpredictable, many people find that they avoid any hobby or task that might make them hurt more. Keep a list so you can tell your health care provider at each visit.
- 4. A walk in your shoes.** How much exercise are you able to do? What about your range of motion? How far can you walk before you have to sit and rest? If you're unsure, consider getting a pedometer — a device that records the number of steps you take each day — to track the distance for your health care provider and family.



- 5. Know how much you can stand.** Are you able to stand for a period of time or not? For example, when preparing a meal or standing in line at the pharmacy or grocery store. How long can you stand before you need to shift your body to alleviate the discomfort or sit down?
- 6. Watch what you lift.** Can you carry bags of groceries the same way you used to, or does your pain get in the way? What about picking up your or someone else's infant or toddler?
- 7. Do you struggle to stay connected?** Whether it's from cancer, diabetes, arthritis, an old injury or a host of other conditions, pain hurts. Not just the person in pain, but family members as well. Having pain and some of the treatments for pain can make you lose interest in being sexually intimate with your partner too. Although it's a sensitive subject, talk with him or her about ways to stay connected.
- 8. Jet setting, or no more?** Are you able to travel comfortably, or has traveling become a major ordeal for you? How much did you used to travel? Has your pain prevented you from going to a family wedding or funeral? What about vacations, visits to friends or business travel? What about short trips to the store?
- 9. Explain the pain-sleep cycle.** Does your pain interrupt your sleep? The problem is not getting enough sleep can make your pain worse. Talk to your health care provider and others about how often you are awakened. How difficult is it to fall and stay asleep?
- 10. What's a good day?** Tell people what a good and bad day is related to your pain. Be honest about how it affects your everyday life and well-being — even your ability to make plans. For some, a good day might be simply making it out of the house. Other people might have other milestones (making it through the work day, getting an uninterrupted night's sleep, finishing a simple household chore like washing the dishes or folding the laundry).

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