

SOCIAL CONNECTION, COMMUNICATION AND CHRONIC PAIN

Maintaining meaningful relationships and social support is an important part of overall health and well-being. Living with chronic pain can affect energy, mobility, relationships, and the ability to engage with others. During symptom flares, or when others may not fully understand the experience of pain, many people experience periods of loneliness or disconnection. At times, it may feel easier to withdraw than to participate socially.

When disconnection becomes ongoing, it can contribute to social isolation, having limited social contact or support. Social isolation has been associated with increased stress, poorer sleep, greater pain severity, and more difficulty coping with pain-related changes. In contrast, supportive relationships and a sense of belonging can positively influence well-being, helping to improve mood, reduce stress, and strengthen coping.

While staying socially engaged can feel challenging at times, there are ways to build and maintain support that feel realistic, meaningful, and manageable for you.

The following information and resources can support you in finding ways to increase your social support system.

TYPES OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

Social supports can include friends, family, relatives, elders, colleagues, health professionals, cultural/spiritual supports, peer or recreation groups, etc. Each source of connection will play a unique role in your life by offering different types of support, such as:

- Emotional support (i.e., listening, empathy, hope, love)
- Practical support (i.e., buying groceries, mowing the lawn, driving you to an appointment)
- Informational support (i.e., skills and tips, specific exercises or strategies to manage pain)
- And others (i.e., spiritual fulfillment, source of fun or enjoyment, etc.)

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES TO BUILD YOUR SOCIAL SUPPORT SYSTEM

Regardless of the relationship, meaningful connections require intention and some effort. Support looks different for everyone. The ideas below are meant as gentle invitations, not expectations. You decide what feels safe, comfortable, and manageable for your life.

Some actions you may consider utilizing to increase your social supports:

1. Be proactive

Make a plan to increase your social support system. Remember to set a goal that is simple and something you can actually do. (i.e., "On Monday, I will phone a friend to see how they are doing.")

2. Seek out peers

It is amazing how supportive it feels to have someone say, "me too!" when you share a tough experience or feeling. Finding others who just "get it" and don't need you to explain your pain can be a very motivating experience. There are a variety of opportunities to connect with others who understand pain, such as:

- [Pain Support Line](tel:1-833-261-7246): Call or text 1-833-261-7246
- Pain Support & Wellness Groups: painbc.ca/supportgroups
- Making Sense of Pain: Online: painbc.ca/msop
- Coaching for Health: painbc.ca/coaching
- People in Pain Network: pipain.com
- Self-Management BC: selfmanagementbc.ca

3. Use technology

- You can stay connected with your social support system by making the most of social media.
- If you feel isolated, consider text, WhatsApp, FaceTime, email or an old-fashioned phone call or writing a letter.
- Join an online support group.

4. Try new activities based on your interests

Being more active can help reduce pain, improve mood and decrease stress. Think about what activities you enjoy now or enjoyed in the past and see if there is a related activity you could participate in (i.e., book clubs, crafting groups, cooking classes, etc.). Research what is around you by looking online or asking neighbours and friends.

5. Build on existing connections

- Communication is key. When you are able, reach out to those in your life to let them know that you appreciate them. This appreciation can go a long way in maintaining social connections.
- Share and listen. Without making chronic pain the main topic of every conversation, you may need to find ways to gently let people know how things are going for you, even if they forget to ask. Ensure you are taking time to listen and find out how they're doing as well.
- Avoid social withdrawal. Try not to retreat into social withdrawal when you need to cancel plans. Fight for connection with the people you care about by connecting with them in a way that is possible for you (i.e., catch up over the phone instead).

COMMUNICATION WITH LOVED ONES

You may sometimes feel misunderstood, dismissed or not believed by those around you. It can be particularly stressful when your family and friends have expectations that are not in line with your abilities, energy levels and/or tolerance. **The following communication strategies can help you navigate the relationships in your life:**

1. Briefly explain chronic pain to them

Talking openly about your pain and its impacts can help you become more accepting of your condition, feel more in control, and help loved ones understand your limits and how they can help.

2. Bring your loved one to your appointments

Bring a loved one along with you to your health care appointments and encourage them to ask your provider questions to deepen their understanding of your condition.

3. Make your limits known

To aid in your healing, it's important to avoid over-committing. Be honest with loved ones and let them know about your imitations (i.e., with activities of tasks). Verbalizing your limitations can help set

appropriate expectations with yourself and others and keep you accountable about your limitations and health priorities.

4. Ask for what you need

Others may have opinions about what you need but ultimately you know yourself best. Ask for what you need and what will help you most because you deserve help!

5. Set boundaries

It's important to speak up when something isn't working for you in a relationship, especially if it's related to increased pain. This often means setting boundaries and usually involves asking someone to change their behaviour.

6. Deal with advice gracefully

Unsolicited advice, particularly from a loved one who does not have chronic pain, can be very frustrating. Try to find ways to respond that don't drain you of your energy or increase your stress. Here are a few examples:

- "Thank you for the idea."
- "Thanks so much for the suggestion. I'm very happy with my current health team and health plan. It's working very well for me."

7. Consider your energy levels

When you live with pain, energy is an important resource that needs to be protected. Choose which relationships to give energy and which to invest in less.

8. Hold space to listen

Holding space or creating intentional time to listen to your loved one's perspectives about how chronic pain may be impacting your relationship can offer helpful insights about how to navigate things better together.

For more information and resources about communicating with family and friends, you may consider exploring the following:

- Relationships by LivePlanBe+: liveplanbeplus.ca/course/relationships
- Communication by LivePlanBe+: liveplanbeplus.ca/course/communication
- Toronto Academic Pain Medicine Institute (TAPMI), Communicating with Family and Friends By Pain U Online: tapmipain.ca/patient/managing-my-pain/pain-u-online/communication-friend-family.html

GOOD SOCIAL SUPPORT IS GOOD PAIN MEDICINE

Remember that pain may limit some of your activities, but it doesn't need to limit your social connections. Good social support is like good pain medicine - if you increase your dose even a little bit, it can open the door to new possibilities.

RESOURCES

- Pain BC Information Sheet, Self-Advocacy and Chronic Pain: painbc.ca/self-advocacy-info-sheet
- Pain BC Information Sheet, Managing Chronic Pain in the Workplace: painbc.ca/managing-chronic-pain-in-the-workplace-info-sheet
- Pathways Community Service Directory: pathwaysbc.ca/community
- Empowered Relief®: paincanada.ca/resources/empowered-relief
- Managing Pain Before and After Surgery: paincanada.ca/course/managing
- Pain BC, Find Help Directory: painbc.ca/find-help/resources/directory
- Power Over Pain Portal, Peer Support: portal.poweroverpain.ca/index.php/services/connect
- Gentle Movement @ Home: painbc.ca/find-help/gentle-movement-at-home
- Mindful Hand Drumming @ Home: painbc.ca/mindful-hand-drumming-at-home

REFERENCES

Cordero, D. (2024). The healing others: the essential role of social support on chronic pain management. The Korean journal of pain, 37(2), 280-282. <https://doi.org/10.3344/kjp.24158>

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Published May 2026