



Prohealth UK
THERAPY, SELF-HELP & TRAINING

The Self Care Toolkit

...for people who live with
persistent health conditions

Introduction

Tools

A persistent health problem can be difficult to understand and manage on an everyday basis.

This self-management toolkit is a simple information booklet that could provide you with some handy tips and skills to support you along the way to manage your health and your condition.

It is not meant to be the last word in self-care but a handy guide to help you get started—all you need to be is willing to read it and take on board some of the suggestions.

Tool 1 — Accept that you have a persistent health condition...and move on.

Tool 2 — Get involved—build a support team

Tool 3 — Pacing

Tool 4 — Learn to prioritise and plan out your days.

Tool 5 — Setting Goals / Action Plans.

Tool 6 — Being patient with yourself

Tool 7 — Learn relation skills.

Tool 8 — Stretching and Exercise.

Tool 9 — Keep a diary and track your progress.

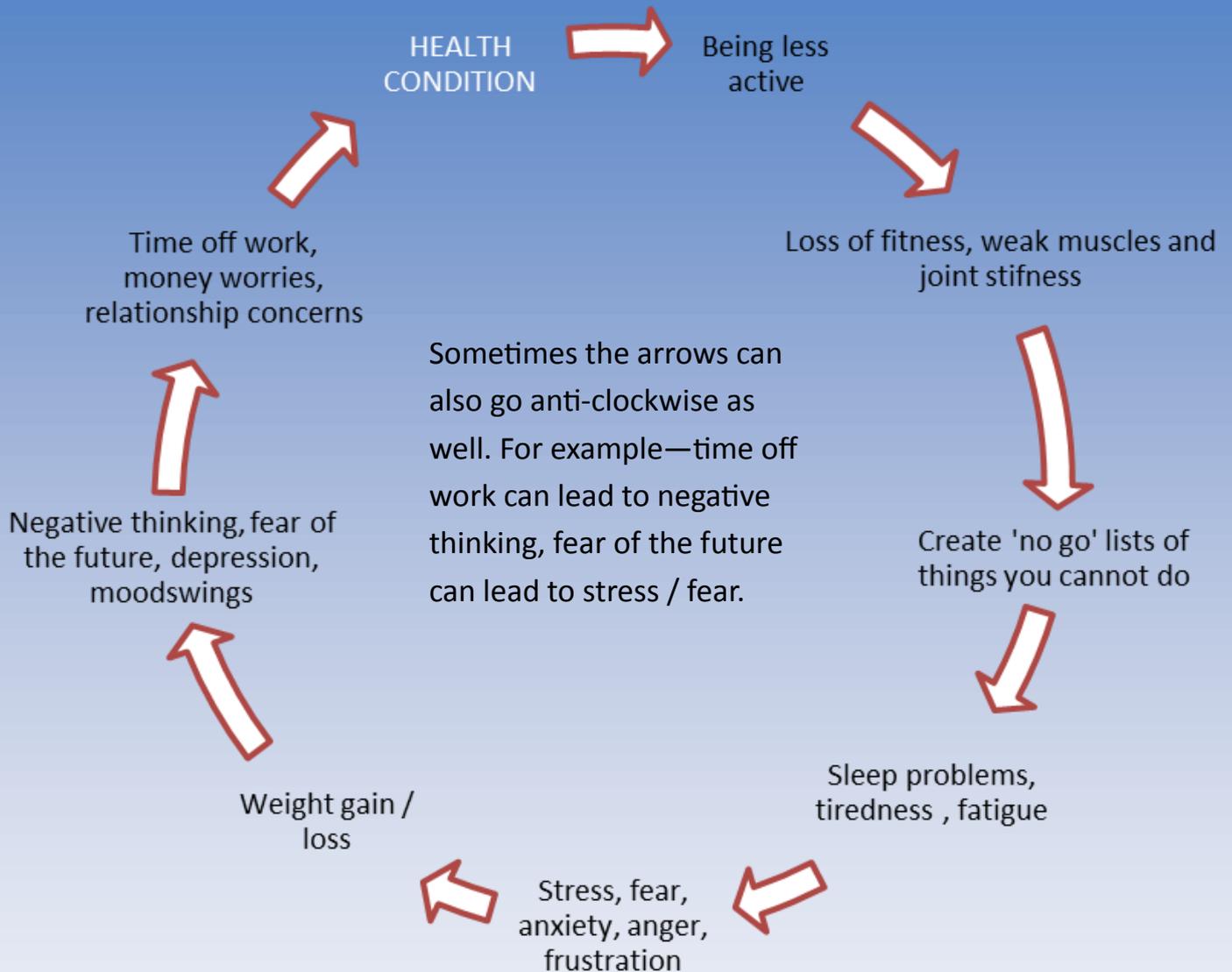
Tool 10 — Have a set-back plan.

Tool 11 — Team work

Tool 12 — Keeping it up...putting in to daily practice the tools from 1-11.

Introduction

The Vicious Health Cycle



Do you recognise yourself in the Vicious Health Cycle?

If so, ask yourself these three questions.

1. Do you do **more** on good days and **less** on bad days?
2. Are you an over-achiever—doing more than you have to?
3. Are you a people pleaser? Do you have a problem saying **NO** to others when you are asked to do things?

Could you see yourself in the Vicious Health Cycle and do you recognise yourself in the three questions? If you did, then this Self-Care Toolkit could be for you, so please read on.

Introduction

Can do / Can't do

For many people a persistent health condition can be disabling and frustrating for many to manage. Some people may not respond to standard medical treatment which can add to the frustration. In some cases people are told by healthcare professionals after a diagnosis or assessment...

"I'm afraid you have a chronic or long-term health problem. You will have to learn to live with it".

To date, your healthcare professionals may have done all that they can to help you and may have used many of the tools available in their toolkit. However, there are so many things that you can do to help self-manage *your* health with the support of your health care professional, family, friends and work colleagues. All you need to be is willing to ask for help.

Have you become a 'can't do' person?

A '**can't do**' person is someone who has tried to carry out or take part in everyday tasks such as going to work, doing the house work, gardening, playing a sport, taking holidays, going to the cinema, eating out or taking part in family activities but has stopped or given them up because of their health condition. When this happens it is usual for your confidence levels to reduce. Is this ringing any bells? If you have reached this point you need to stop and take action.

By taking on board and practising the tools in the Self Care Toolkit, you could become a '**can do**' person again but it could take time so be patient with yourself.

Introduction

You're not alone

Are persistent health conditions a big problem in the UK?

The short answer is yes so you are not on your own. Persistent health conditions affect more than 15.4 million people in the UK in their everyday living. They can be disabling and frustrating for many people to deal with. Health problems can also affect relationships with family, friends and work colleagues.

“But why do I need to manage my health condition? I see my health care professional and aren't they supposed to do that for me?”

Many people with persistent health conditions see their health care professional for treatment, help and support. But have you estimated how many hours during the course of a year you spend with your health care professional?

It has been said that people with persistent health conditions many spend less than 3 hours a year on average in contact with a health care professional. For the remaining **'8,733 hours'** in the year they are on their own.

So as you can see, the need to become more involved in your own self-care management is both necessary and important.

It is certainly not all up to your doctor or health care professional to manage your health condition. You have to play a vital part as well—it is all about teamwork.

Introduction

Where do I start?

Your next question may be “**Well how can I become more involved and how do I get started?**” Using different skills and tools can be helpful to get you started. It is like a motor mechanic who has many tools in his / her toolbox to repair and maintain cars. People with health conditions also need a selection of tools to help them successfully self-manage their own health condition.

You may not need to use all the tools suggested in the toolkit, but like any good motor mechanic, it is best to have a variety of tools at the ready to dip into when and if they are needed.

Self-managing a persistent health condition is not as hard as you may think—so let’s get started and look at the first tool in your self-care toolkit.

The Self- Management Toolkit

Tool 1

Accept that you have a persistent health condition...and then begin to move on.

Acceptance is the first and the most important tool in your Self-Care Toolkit.

Acceptance is not about giving up but recognising that you need to take more control with regards to how you can better self-manage your health condition.

Acceptance is also a bit like opening a door—a door that will allow you to access more self-managing opportunities. The key that you need to open this door is not as big as you think. All you have to do is to be willing to use it. Are you yet?

The Self- Management Toolkit

Tool 2

Get involved—build a support team.

Being a successful self-manager means getting both help and support from others. Ask your health care professional, friends, family and work colleagues about working more together—becoming a team. Develop a self-management plan. Find out if there are other support groups in your community you could join which could provide you with more self-help management skills. If cannot locate one, why not start one with other like-minded people?

The Self- Management Toolkit

Tool 3

Pacing

Pacing daily activities is one of the key tools to self-managing your health condition. You need to begin to pace your work and also other everyday activities. You may have recognised your in the vicious cycle. You tend to over-do things, or rest too much and become inactive and lose fitness.

Pacing in short is: taking a break *before* you need it throughout the day. But how can you remember to pace yourself?

Remember the old saying..."**How do you eat an elephant?**"

Answer: **One bite at a time!** Pacing is carrying out activities one bite at a time, and not tackling all of them at once.

For examples of pacing see the daily activities on page 19.

The Self- Management Toolkit

Tool 4

Learn to prioritise and plan your days.

Prioritising and planning your days is an essential tool. Make a list of things you would like to do but remember to be flexible. It is a great way to set yourself a starting point.

Examples:

- Monday a.m.—vacuum the living room and have a couple of breaks so that I pace myself.
- Monday p.m.—prepare food for evening meal—sit down to do this.
- Tuesday a.m.—go swimming—meet a friend for coffee—practise some relaxation when I get home.
- Tuesday p.m.—I write an activity plan for the next day.

The Self- Management Toolkit

Tool 5

Setting Goals / Action Plans

You may want to run before you can walk as that old saying goes. So to avoid this happening set yourself simple, realistic goals or action plans. Just as you need goalposts when playing football, or a finishing line when racing—you need something to aim for.

Perhaps you could set yourself a simple, hourly, daily or weekly action plan. Always ask for help from your health care professional if you are not sure. You can also learn more about setting goals and action planning when you attend a Self-Management Programme (SMP).

See page 23 for more information about attending an SMP.

The Self- Management Toolkit

Tool 6

Be patient with yourself

Take things steadily. It may take you a few weeks or months to see changes or improvements. When you start to feel good, you may want to catch up with activities that you may have let go of.

Don't be tempted to overdo it otherwise your chances of yet another setback could increase. A good saying is 'take things one day at a time'. And also...ask for help and support from others!

The Self- Management Toolkit

Tool 7

Learn relaxation skills

Relaxation skills are very important for tense muscles in the body and for unwinding the mind.

Relaxation could be:

- Reading a book
- Listening to some music
- Gardening
- Meeting friends for a coffee
- Go to the cinema or restaurant
- Belly breathing
- Meditation
- Dancing
- Walking

The Self- Management Toolkit

Tool 8

Exercise

Many people with health conditions fear exercise in case it causes more problems. However this is not true. Regular stretching and exercising actually decreases pain discomfort. It prepare the body for other activities, it can strengthen weak muscles and you will also feel better for it.

If you are in pain, remember that unfit and under-used muscles feel more pain than toned ones. Talk with your physiotherapist or fitness coach about an individually tailored stretching and exercise programme that you can work on steadily and safely. This will help build your confidence, muscle and joint strength. Remember that swimming (or just walking up and down in the pool) is also a low impact exercise and is good for you if you have joint problems. There are many good reasons why exercise is good for you on page 22.

The Self- Management Toolkit

Tool 9

Keep a diary and track your progress

Keeping a diary of your progress will help you to see how far you have come and note the successes you have achieved. This will help you to build on success. But it is also handy to note what didn't work so you can learn from those experiences. We sometimes learn more from our errors, rather than our successes.

Try to write down one piece of evidence each day to show yourself how you positively self-managing your health. Doing this has been shown to increase people's confidence.

The Self- Management Toolkit

Tool 10

Have a plan for setbacks

Is it realistic to think you will never have a set-back? The simple answer is ***NO!***

Developing a setback plan is good self-management. Ask your healthcare provider if you need help in making one. Make a note of what triggered your setback and what helped. This could be useful information if and when you experience another.

There is an example of a setback plan on page 20.

The Self- Management Toolkit

Tool 11

Team Work

Team work between you and your healthcare provider is vital. Imagine a football team playing without a game plan.

Managing your health condition is not a 'one way street' and it is unrealistic for your health care professional to totally solve it for you. You will have an important part to play as well.

Together both you and your healthcare professional can set or develop an action plan.

This plan could help you both track your progress. It is easy and not as hard as you think.

The Self- Management Toolkit

Tool 12

Keep it up! Put in to practice the self-care tools from 1-11

You may be asking yourself do I have to put these tools into daily practice? **What every day?** The simple answer is **Yes**. Just as the person with diabetes has to take their medication and maintain their daily diet, **your** treatment is planning / prioritising, pacing, setting weekly or long-term goals and action plans, relaxation, exercise generally keeping active and being in charge of you health condition. Keeping it up is difficult for many people but it is not as hard as you think once you have set yourself a routine. Just like brushing your teeth, self-managing your health conditions will become a habit. Get others involved and make self management fun.

What three things have I learned about managing my health condition in the self-care toolkit?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What will I try? _____

The Self- Management Toolkit

Take it steady

Examples of pacing your daily activities

Ironing

As an alternative to doing a large amount in all one go, do smaller amounts frequently. Instead of doing the whole washing load of ironing at once, spread it over a period of days.

E.g. have two or three piles.

- An urgent pile.
- A not so urgent pile.
- 'I can do that at the end of the week' pile.

Shopping

Instead of doing one large weekly shop, cut it down to a few trips to the shops per week. Divide your shopping into more bags, so that you not lifting and carrying heavy bags. Remember to ask staff to help carry the shopping and put it in your car; remembering to get someone at home (family or neighbour) to lift and carry your shopping into the home. Or consider Internet shopping, and then you just have to pack the items away once they have been delivered to your home.

These are just a couple of examples. There may be many other every day activities that you need to think through before you tackle them.

If you stop and think about what you intend to do **before** you do it, then there is less of a chance that you will have a setback and in turn increase your condition.

Remember pacing is 'taking a break before you need it' and spreading out activities.

The Self- Management Toolkit

Setbacks

Having a setback plan

It is not realistic to think that you will never have a setback ever again. Remember if you are an over-achiever, it is easy to forget to pace yourself and in turn you may experience a setback.

So the first thing not to do is panic, but many people do. It is best to have a setback plan ready if one occurs.

Setbacks are usually caused by doing too much—overdoing it, pressure from others or just forgetting you have a persistent health problem. Don't get annoyed with yourself, it is common to occasionally have setbacks.

If you are not sure how to prepare a setback plan, please ask your GP or healthcare professional.

Prioritise your responsibilities.

Pace yourself. Break up tasks into smaller portions. Rest in between. Reduce your activities until the setback settles. Be kind to yourself. Say '**NO**' to any unnecessary demands put upon you until you are feeling healthier. And...don't be too proud to '**ASK**' for help!

Taking your medication.

Follow or ask advice of your GP or Pharmacist about medication and when you need to take it. If you have to take regular medication, think of ways to remind you to take it. Many people just simply forget. Use post-it notes, a timer, or get someone to remind you.

Please remember that taking medication if you have musculoskeletal pain (back, leg, arm, neck etc.) may mask the pain and encourage you to do more.

For musculoskeletal pain (back, leg, arm, neck etc.)

Apply heat and / or ice in a way that makes you most comfortable. To relieve initial pain, you could apply ice packs wrapped in towels for 5 minutes every hour for the first one or two days. Always make sure you have a cloth of some type between your skin and the ice, to prevent causing an ice burn. (People with rheumatic problems may prefer to use heat rather than ice).

Again, if you're not sure, seek advice from your GP or healthcare professional.

Take it easy

Briefly cut back on normal activities, lie down for a short while and relax but not for too long. Bed rest weakens muscle strength rapidly, you lose about 1% of total muscle strength a day if you become inactive—remember keeping active and mobile can actually speed your recovery.

Try to start moving gently

Remember to pace yourself. Begin gentle stretching and movement as soon as possible to regain normal suppleness. Keeping active may seem alien to you, but in self-management terms, learning to live with a persistent health condition is a skill to be learned. Don't be put off—it does work!

Relaxation

Using relaxation is another good way of managing a setback. Accept the situation that you are experiencing as a setback, and just as it has come, it will go.

16 reasons why stretching and exercising (don't forget swimming) is good for you.

- Helps to improve and maintain good overall health.
- Encourages a strong cardiovascular system—heart, lungs and blood vessels.
- Reduces the risk of persistent illnesses.
- Increases muscle strength.
- Improves flexibility.
- Increases endurance and stamina.
- Increase natural painkillers (endorphins).
- Helps with weight control.
- Helps to improve quality of sleep.
- Helps balance and co-ordination.
- Reduces fatigue and increases energy.
- Reduces muscular tension, stress and depression.
- Helps combat depression and anxiety.
- Helps maintain a positive outlook.
- Can be done in a social way.

Drinking water

Water is essential for a healthy life so drinking plenty of water is important for everyone. It's even more important if you are taking part in physical exercise, so make sure you keep properly hydrated before, during and after exercising.

Useful Resources

Helpful Services

Self-management programmes (SMPs)

These are run in community by highly trained tutors who also have persistent health conditions themselves but have learned to be good self-managers. SMPs are run by **Arthritis Care** called ***Challenging Arthritis*** (www.arthritiscare.org.uk) and the **Expert Patients Programme** (www.expertpatients.co.uk).

Talking Health (www.talkinghealth.org) is a network of independent freelance consultants, organisations and individuals supportive of the development of values based, lay-led self-management and empowerment training for people with long –term conditions, and the health and social care professionals that support them. SMPs can provide you with many self-management tools, *but you have to do the work*.

NHS Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

This service can provide information that may help you in locating other support services. You can contact them via your local NHS Primary (or Hospital) Care Trust or go to www.pals.nhs.uk

NHS Choices

NHS Choices is the online 'front door' to the NHS. It is the country's biggest health website and gives all the information you need to make choices about your health.

Utilising Community Resources

Your local library is a good starting point as they hold useful information (access to the internet, books, DVDs and CDs) about other local health and community initiatives.

Making Changes

Becoming Active

GP 'Exercise on Referral'

If you are unsure about becoming active or exercising, your GP can refer you to their GP 'Exercise on Referral' programme. These types of schemes are run within local gyms and fitness centres and can include facilities for swimming. Ask at your GP surgery for more information.

Walking for Health

Also find out more about 'Walking for Health'. These are usually run locally by your local Borough Council. Please also visit the Walking Health Initiative website www.whi.org.uk

Exercise

There are a wide variety of different exercise programmes. Some common ones include.

- Yoga
- Tai Chi
- Pilates

Please make sure that your teacher is qualified and experienced in teaching people with persistent health conditions. You should be encouraged to exercise at a pace that feels right for you.

Body Care

Looking after your whole body is very important, so please think about...

- Eating Healthy Food
- Sleeping only at night and avoiding cat naps during the day.
- Being hygienic by washing and grooming your body daily.

Information & Support

Further resources

Alcoholics Anonymous: www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Aphasia: www.ukconnect.org.uk

Asthma UK: www.asthma.org.uk

Arthritis Care: www.arthritiscare.org.uk

Arthritis Research UK: www.arthritisresearch.org.uk

BackCare: www.backcare.org.uk

British Pain Society: www.britishpainsociety.org

British Heart Foundation: www.bhf.org.uk

British Lung Foundation—Breatheasy group: www.lunguk.org

Macmillan Cancer Support: www.macmillan.org.uk

Diabetes UK: www.diabetes.org.uk

Depression Alliance: www.depressionalliance.org

Fibromyalgia Association UK: www.fibromyalgia-associationuk.org

Healthtalkonline: www.healthtalkonline.org

ME Association: www.meassociation.org.uk

Migraine Trust: www.migrainetrust.org

MIND confidential help and advice mental health issues: www.mind.org.uk

Multiple Sclerosis Society: www.mssociety.org.uk

NHS Direct: www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk (Tel 0845 4647)

NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk

Overcoming (health problems): www.overcoming.co.uk

Pain Concern: www.painconcern.org.uk

Pain Relief Foundation: www.painrelieffoundation.org.uk

Parkinson's: www.parkinsons.org.uk

Rheumatoid Arthritis Society: www.rheumatoid.org.uk

Samaritans: www.samaritans.org.uk

Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health: www.scmh.org.uk

Stroke Association: www.stroke.org.uk

Talking Health: www.talkinghealth.org

Your Health Your Way: www.nhs.uk/yourhealth