

17. Do you have to follow your exercise plan when you are in pain?

Emma, 45, had been following her exercise plan for shoulder pain for several months. At first, she was proud of her discipline. Every morning before work, she rolled out her mat, did her stretches, and ticked off each exercise exactly as prescribed. She liked the feeling of control—of “doing it right.”

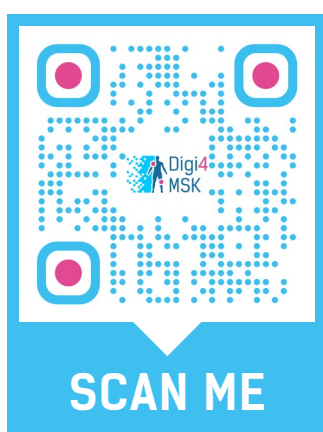
But as time went on, things got complicated. Some mornings her shoulder ached more than usual. She hesitated before starting, unsure whether to push through or skip the session. *“If I can’t do everything perfectly”, she thought, “then it’s pointless.”*

That thought grew stronger. On days when the pain flared, she avoided the exercises altogether, promising she would start again properly tomorrow. Then tomorrow became next week. Each missed session left her feeling guilty, as if all her previous effort had been wasted. *“Either I follow the plan exactly”, she told herself, “or I might as well not do it at all.”*

The pain itself had not worsened much, but her stress about doing things “right” had. She spent more time worrying about the rules of the plan than listening to her body. When friends asked how the program was going, she smiled politely and said, *“I’ll start again soon.”*

Every time she saw her unused exercise mat in the corner, she wondered if there was a middle ground—something between perfection and giving up completely.

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Skills you can build by watching the video:

- Understanding that following an exercise plan does not have to be “all or nothing”.
- Learning how to handle days when pain or fatigue make it hard to follow the plan exactly.
- Recognizing that consistency, flexibility, and self-compassion help more than rigid routines.
- Feeling more confident in adapting your activities to your situation without guilt.

YouTube link: <https://youtu.be/8BSC5aEoAHs>

17.1. Why does being flexible with your movement help you?

1. **It keeps you going:** Trying to do the exact same exercise on a bad day as on a good day often leads to pain flares. When that happens, it is easy to get discouraged and stop exercising completely. Being flexible means you can adjust, do a little less, or change what you do, so you keep moving and do not give up.
2. **You learn what works for your body:** Your pain can change day by day. A flexible plan teaches you how to **listen to your body** and adapt. This helps you figure out what you can safely do on different days, building your confidence and making you feel more in control of your pain.
3. **No more “all or nothing” thinking:** It is common to think if you cannot do a full workout, it is not worth doing anything. But for pain, **some movement is always better than no movement**. A flexible plan helps you avoid that “all or nothing” trap. Even a short walk or gentle stretches on a tough day keep you moving forward.
4. **It reduces fear and worry:** If you are scared that moving will make your pain worse, you will naturally avoid it. Knowing you can change your activity based on how you feel helps reduce that fear. You learn that movement is safe, and you can control how much you do, even with pain.



17.2. How to be flexible with your activity plan?

1. **Listen to your body—it is your best guide:** Instead of a fixed amount of time or reps, think about how your body feels. If your pain is higher, maybe do less. If you are having a good day, you can do a little more.
2. **“Pacing” is key:** This means balancing activity with rest. Do not push through pain until you crash. Learn to spread your activities throughout the day or week, taking short breaks before pain gets too bad.
3. **Consistency over intensity:** Doing *something* regularly—like a short walk every day—is much more effective for long-term pain management than pushing hard occasionally and then taking weeks off due to a flare-up.
4. **Adjust. Do not stop:** If your plan says walk for 30 minutes but you are having a bad day, try 10 minutes or just gentle stretching, or even just focus on deep breathing. The goal is to stay as active as your pain allows.
5. **Communicate with your healthcare team:** Talk to your doctor or physical therapist about how your plan feels. They can help you learn how to adjust your activities safely and effectively, and taking into consideration other aspects such as possible costs.

Takeaway messages:

Your physical activity plan is a tool to help you live better, not a strict guideline. By learning to be flexible, you empower yourself to keep moving, build resilience, and improve your health and well-being, even with pain in your life.

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