

# Pacing: fundamental skills for supporting recovery from chronic fatigue conditions

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Pacing is one of the most important skills to learn in recovery from chronic fatigue. People with chronic fatigue conditions usually find that they use what I call 'emergency energy' to perform everyday tasks. When someone doesn't have the energy to walk up stairs, they may use emergency energy to do so. It leaves people with the common feeling of being 'tired but wired'. Emergency energy is the same survival mode that is used by the body when faced with a stress or threat. Once a threat has passed, and the person is safe once more, a healthy body will switch into recovery mode. People with chronic fatigue can dip into this survival mode frequently throughout the day, and their bodies may not readily switch back into recovery mode. At worst, the person uses emergency energy to do the smallest tasks, like getting out of bed, or cleaning their teeth, and is in survival mode the whole time.

When the body is in survival mode, healing is put on hold. It is in recovery mode that healing can occur. Using emergency energy not only suspends healing, it is also exhausting. Survival mode is hugely stressful for the body. It is only supposed to be activated for a few minutes to a few hours. The body's supplies of nutrients, hormones, stored sugars and other resources needed for growth, healing and repair become depleted. I would go as far as saying it is not possible to recover from chronic fatigue if you dip into emergency energy reserves on a regular basis. Using pacing well means that your body stays in a healing state as much as possible, and recovery then can happen.

When someone first gets ill with ME or chronic fatigue, the body has very little access to 'real energy'. If the person doesn't rest adequately during this time, they will be switching into survival mode to access emergency energy, and this places the body under stress, in addition to the stress of being unwell. This makes accessing recovery more difficult. The extent to which someone is able to access recovery mode at this time may explain why some people recover from a viral infection, while others get post-viral fatigue, and why chronic stress can predispose someone to a chronic fatigue condition.

It is common for people to push through fatigue, especially in the early days of the condition, and it can also be difficult to spot how once simple tasks are putting the body under such stress. This perpetuation of emergency mode, at the expense of healing, can explain why fatigue can become chronic; why it becomes such a stuck picture. When recovering from fatigue conditions, there is a time to rest and a time to build up strength once more. This changes over time, and even once the person has begun to build up, there are periods when rest is more important. Using pacing, you can meet your body's need for rest, and build up when the time is right. This means you stay within your limits and access your body's capacity to heal to the fullest potential.

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## A time to rest and time to build

As fatigue conditions are becoming better understood, it is becoming clear that in the first few weeks, it is essential to rest adequately, and after a while it will be important to gently begin to increase your capacity for activity once more. Without an early diagnosis, or helpful medical advice, people often push through those early days of illness, depleting the body further. Some people don't realise how tired they are until they are forced to stop. Not resting adequately at the early stages of the illness means that the recovery time can be longer. But it is also possible for people to rest *too much* and not begin the process of building up their health and strength once more. This is sometimes because people experience that too

much activity causes a relapse and, understandably, rest more to avoid that. Bed rest results in a decrease in muscle tone, changes in blood pressure and changes in mood, that all have consequences for the body's ability to heal. This can explain why chronic fatigue conditions can be compounded by accumulated symptoms, including back pain, tendonitis, dizziness, balance problems and digestive problems (although there can be other explanations for these too).

While extending periods of rest beyond what is needed can be unhelpful, a more common mistake is that as people begin to feel better, they do too much too quickly, and knock themselves back. This is because they push through the limits of the energy levels they now have, and into survival mode to access emergency energy. This may cause a relapse, but at the very least, they would need time and energy to recover from a period of being in survival mode. This is why people can feel like they make two steps forward and three steps back – a classic and frustrating pattern, that most people who have chronic fatigue will recognise only too well.

There is a common pattern of 'boom and bust' where a period of activity is followed by exhaustion. The boom is often a result of needing to complete tasks when the person has some energy, and they push through their energy limits – out of a sense of frustration or urgency, or even excitement of finally being active. However, the boom of activity using emergency energy is usually followed by bust; while the body recovers. Pacing aims to flatten out the peaks and troughs of the boom-bust cycle and maintain the optimal healing state, where there is enough energy to be directed at healing.

Basic pacing simply means doing little and often – breaking down periods of activity into smaller chunks, interspersed by rest periods. However, the rest-activity balance can be very confusing, and difficult to work out, especially as our energy levels fluctuate and capacities for activity can change throughout the day or from week to week. So there may be new skills to learn – ones that require listening to your body and being sensitive to, and ultimately *responding* to your body's signals. Pacing based on this kind of body awareness is a very powerful skill. For many, this is no easy task, and takes a lot of practice. But once you have mastered them, pacing skills can see you through to full recovery and become fantastic life skills for a life with full health.

## Pacing skills I: accessing a healing state

- Being able to know whether you are in healing state or in survival mode
- Being able to change state if you go into survival mode

Being able to pace requires you to be able access a restful, healing state, and recognise when you are in that state. It also requires you to be able to spot whether you are entering survival mode. Some people are in an emergency state constantly – especially if they have very low energy levels, or if they have unprocessed traumatic experiences. If this is the case, they may initially find it very difficult to use pacing skills. However, the tools outlined in information sheet on strategies for reducing stress will remind their body how to switch into healing mode once more, and it will be important to practice these skills first. Cognitive approaches to chronic fatigue, including CBT, NLP and Lightening Process, all offer useful tools for changing your state to recovery mode.

Craniosacral therapy is fantastic for switching the body out of emergency mode, and access a healing state. After long periods in emergency mode, craniosacral therapy can be used to remind your body how rest once more, and some people find that remembering the sensations of a craniosacral session can directly settle their nervous system and this is a good way to access a healing state.

If someone uses emergency energy on a daily basis over a long period of time, it is possible for the nervous system to become almost hardwired into emergency mode. This means that adrenal energy is accessed first, out of habit, even if there is some healthy energy available. It can therefore be important to re-train your nervous system to stop switching into emergency mode at the first sign of activity, by using skills to soothe yourself, such as grounding, cognitive skills (such as rationalising) and body awareness tools, until your body has the time and space to draw on healthy energy to do the activity. With repetition and practice, the 'wiring' changes, and healthy energy use becomes normal, while emergency energy is only used when it's supposed to be – in emergencies.

### **Active rest is restorative**

The concept of active rest can be useful here. Active rest is not the same as sleeping (which some people don't find restful or restorative, especially if they suffer from bad dreams) or simply

lying on the sofa. Active rest is restorative. This means doing a restful, resourcing activity, like listening to a relaxation CD, or soothing music, meditation, sitting quietly in the park, doing a visualisation or bringing attention to pleasant sensation. It can be important to programme active rest periods into your day, in addition to any nap periods, and in between any activity periods. Some people find writing the times of the rest periods down, perhaps as a timetable before embarking on their day, or before starting a particular activity, helps them stick to their plans for rest and not push beyond their energy limits.

## Pacing skills 2: little and often

- Resting, or modifying activity, to stay within your energy limits
- Managing your rest so that you can build up your strength and stamina

Keeping a diary over a couple of weeks, of your sleep and rest periods, and your levels of activity can be very helpful in planning pacing. At first, pacing may be a mathematical activity, of looking at a task, and breaking it into chunks, interspersed by rest periods. Or looking at a period of rest, and breaking it into chunks interspersed by activity. However, as you get better at tracking your states, this planning needs to be refined by monitoring your energy levels (see below for tracking skills) as these will change over time, and some days you may have less energy than others.

Pacing essentially means little and often, rather than large chunks of activity or rest at any one time. For example, if you have one hour of housework to do, breaking that up into four 15 minute chunks with a 10-30 minute rest period in between may be beneficial, as it means you can build up your strength and activity levels, and stop before you switch into emergency mode. The rest periods in between mean that what energy you have left over can be redirected to healing, and they allow you to once again build up your energy levels to meet the next period of activity.

However, if you start to reach your energy limit before the 15 minutes of activity is reached, it is vital to stop and rest. It might be that you need to break the housework down into 10 minute chunks. This can be frustrating, and one tendency can be to rush and finish the task, while you are in an activity period. But this means you are switching into emergency energy mode, and at these times, it is

important to **remind yourself that *nothing* is more important than recovering, not even completing this task.** Be gentle yet firm with yourself, and know it won't always be like this: If you get pacing right, it won't be long before you start making steady progress in building up your health and activity levels.

Conversely you may feel you have heaps of energy left over at 15 minutes. When you get really good at pacing, you can try extending the activity period if you feel this. However, it is often better to stick with what you agreed before you started the task and rest after 15 minutes. This means that you can take the time to really check you haven't switched into emergency mode without noticing. Practice pacing as an antidote to the very common tendency to push ourselves. It is also better to have more energy left over, which can be directed at healing during a rest period, than to go over your limits. If you continue to find that you have enough energy and stamina to do more than 15 minutes, **try reducing the rest period before you increase the length of activity.**

Some people find it helpful to think of an 'energy bank account.' At any one time, that energy bank account should be *at least* one third full, with that one third being directed at healing, and whatever is left over and above that third can be used for activity. Early on in the fatigue condition or following a recent relapse, it can be helpful to keep your energy bank account *half* full. Going overdrawn (ie into emergency mode) needs paying back, with interest.

### ***Pace rest as well as activity***

Even a few hours of bed rest can result in a deconditioning of muscle tone, decrease blood pressure, and affect your mood, so breaking up bed rest can also be beneficial. If you can only get out of bed for one hour each day, consider breaking that hour up into three chunks of 20 minutes, a few hours apart.

If you have had a lot of bed rest, your deep postural muscles may get very tired, until they build up strength again. If you rest sitting in a chair, rather than a bed, that can help build your muscles up gently. And if you can sit for some of that time with your back unsupported, that will also help. However, it is important to pace this, as any activity, and not push yourself to rest in a chair, if really you need to be flat and comfortable on your bed. If you only rest on your bed, consider introducing into your day, one rest period in a chair, and you can increase that as you get better.

If you find you need a three hour rest in the afternoon, try breaking that up into three hour-long chunks and have one in the morning, one at midday and one in the afternoon. However, if you are sleeping for those three hours, you may find it increases anxiety to interrupt your sleep cycle. If so, it is likely you need that full three-hour sleep cycle. Experiment a bit, if you find you feel ok with two hours sleep in the afternoon, and one hour's rest earlier or later in the day, that may be more beneficial. Equally, if you are having, say, 12 hours sleep each night and none during the day, you could try reducing that to 9 hours with a three hours rest period in the afternoon. It is not advisable to reduce your sleep to less than about 8 or 9 hours, and for some people more is important. This can also change over time, and can be hard to measure if sleep is not yet restful due to nightmares or a more chronic state of anxiety or alertness.

There is no one rule for sleep. It can take a few weeks of experimentation to get it right, and it is important to introduce small changes slowly. If you have had disrupted sleep patterns in the past, it may be better not to try sleep pacing, and just do activity pacing, introducing good rest periods. You may find the length of time you need to sleep changing naturally as a result.

### Pacing skills 3: tracking

- Being able to know when you are approaching your energy limit
- Being able to know when to rest, or modify your activity, to avoid going over your limit

The most powerful pacing skill is to be able to adequately track when you need to rest, and when you need to be building up your strength from moment to moment. And once you begin to build up your strength, these tracking skills enable you to stay within the limits of your healthy energy levels and not switch into emergency mode. And if life stresses or an urgent task has required a burst of adrenaline and emergency energy, then your other pacing skills include ways reset your body back into recovery mode, through active rest or other techniques or tools you have found to access a healing state, as soon as you can.

#### ***People have different clues that tell them they are approaching their limit***

The key to accurate pacing is in tracking body sensations, emotions and thought patterns, to

know when you are approaching the limits of your energy levels at any moment. People recognise when they change between healing state and emergency state in a number of different ways. Because emergency energy requires adrenaline, most people feel an increase in stress or anxiety, or (confusingly) an increase in energy. Others notice that they feel more driven, or it seems increasingly important to finish the task they have set themselves. If you are someone who gets angry or irritable when stressed, for example, then irritability may be a sign you are approaching, or have pushed through, the limit of your energy levels.

Certain activities can feel stressful simply as a result of needing to use emergency energy, and people with fatigue conditions can become avoidant of certain activities. Some people have thought they have developed agoraphobia, because trips out of the house have required them to use emergency energy, and so outside the house has been associated with elevated stress levels. If you are finding social situations stressful, there may be other reasons (like a difficult relationship), but see if you can find a way to pace these activities simply to stay within your energy levels, and see if they become less stressful.

Use body awareness to track sensations, and make a note of how you know when you reach your limit. At first you may notice only *after* you have pushed through a limit. But with practice, you will find it easier to spot a limit approaching and adapt your activity to support you to stay within your energy levels. Once you switch into emergency mode, there are an important set of skills you can use, to calm your nervous system down and re-enter recovery state. If you know you have switched into emergency mode, you can know to use these skills, this may include stopping the activity or leaving the situation. If tracking tells you that you are still in healing mode, you know you can continue the level of activity and stay within your energy limits. Below are lists of clues people use to see when they are switching between states. Everyone has a unique set of clues – these are just some that might be helpful markers. Only you will know what yours will be, and you will discover them by monitoring your body sensations and mental or emotional states.

#### **Possible signs you are switching into emergency energy mode:**

- Increase in anxiety
- Feeling jittery or jumpy, sensitive to noise or bright lights
- Feeling driven, pushing yourself

- Feeling an increase in focus, or unable to stop until you complete the task
- Increase in muscle tension, stiffness or pain
- Feeling cold or unable to get hands or feet warm
- Feeling irritable, argumentative or angry

#### **Possible signs you are switching into recovery state:**

- Sense of relief
- Feeling more at ease, calm or settled
- Relaxation, draining of tension
- Sighing, yawning
- Crying, tearfulness

As you get better at tracking your states, you will be able to spot when you are approaching the limits of your energy levels and change what you are doing well ahead of reaching it. You can then pause to have a rest, or sit and have a cup of tea or a snack to boost your energy levels once more. The earlier you spot yourself approaching your limits, the shorter the period of rest can be, or eventually you may be able to keep doing the task, but more slowly and calmly.

At first, when your energy levels are really low, your limit may approach suddenly and be like a knife edge: one minute you may be feeling fine, the next minute you may be very anxious, or collapsed or exhausted, with no apparent warning. This is because without healthy energy reserves, the change in state will be especially acute. Your tracking skills need to be more sensitive when your energy levels are lower.

As you get healthier and your energy reserves build, your limits will be easier to spot, be slower to approach and be more flexible. Over time, as you get healthier, you will notice yourself feeling tired after activity in a way that feels very different from fatigue. You may be able to cope with feeling 'proper' tiredness every now and then, if you are resting adequately, and you may even enjoy the feeling. But remember, healthy people hear tiredness as a cue to rest.

Once you have mastered pacing your hours and days, extend your pacing skills to cover periods of weeks or months. Try and make sure you have a buffer of energy to cope with life's unexpected twists and turns. Programme in rest periods – a whole weekend of downtime or a holiday. Once again, it may help you to plan ahead and put these in your diary, rather than leave it until you are in a period of feeling tired, or beginning to notice fatigue building.

## Summary

Pacing skills mean that you:

- know whether you are in healing state or in survival mode
- know when you are approaching your energy limit
- know when to rest, or modify your activity, to avoid going over your limit
- are able to change state if you do go into emergency mode
- manage your rest so that you can build up your strength and stamina
- are able to build up your capacity for activity without going over your limits.

Pacing means that your healthy energy levels get a chance to build, and as they do so, pacing becomes easier. Pacing enables you to step into the virtuous circle of recovery that leads to full health.

However, no matter how skilful you become at pacing, life happens – challenges, illnesses and real emergencies mean that relapses are an inevitable part of the recovery process. As health builds, people tend to rely on more predictable energy levels, and on being able to have restorative sleep. They begin to rely less on pacing. However, when energy levels are low, like during a relapse, your pacing skills need to be more sensitive and refined. Use relapses as a way to really hone your pacing skills. These skills have enabled you to build up your health prior to this relapse, and you are now in a stronger place than at the time of the last one. This also means that you can recover from this one faster. If you use this opportunity to get your pacing skills even better, you will build your health up even more effectively after this one. Pacing well during a relapse can also mean that energy levels may not dip quite so low or for so long, so that you can find your way back into making steady progress more easily.

Remember, having a relapse does *not* mean you aren't recovering, and they do *not* mean you have returned to square one – far from it. With time and with good pacing, you will see that over all you are making steady progress, that the periods of time between relapses decreases, and that feeling healthier becomes the norm, while fatigue becomes less familiar. Once your health and energy levels have built up substantially, pacing – together with other life skills – can help ensure you don't have relapses at all. This is when you step from recovery into a new phase of living life as you want to.