

HELPING FAMILY & FRIENDS UNDERSTAND YOUR LIMITS WHEN YOU'RE LIVING WITH CHRONIC PAIN

1. Be Honest and Direct

Other people are not mind readers, or body readers. They really don't know what we're going through unless we tell them. It's best to explain openly and clearly how we're feeling, what our limits are, and what we need from them, whether it's to offer a helping hand or to simply give us more space.

Sometimes we feel we have to protect others from the pain we're in, and we think we're going to do that by not telling them about it. This really doesn't serve anyone. Others can usually tell when we're not feeling like ourselves, but they may not understand the extent of the pain we're in, and they may misread our low energy level as lack of interest in them, moodiness, selfishness, or take it personally in some other way.

By being open and direct without dramatizing it, we're letting them know the reason why we're not very energetic or enthusiastic at the moment, and we're also allowing them to be part of our healing path.

2. Avoid Minimizing

When asked how we're feeling, a lot of us will minimize the level of pain we're in, even to our doctors. We do this for a number of good reasons: we don't want others to feel bad for us, we don't want to complain or wear people out listening to our trials, and we're tired of explaining ourselves.

This seems completely sensible, but sometimes it backfires. Doctors must always know what's going on or they can't measure the effectiveness of treatments, and others around us need to know what they can and can't expect from us in terms of energy levels, availability, and in order to offer appropriate emotional support.

3. Teach Others Your Pain Scale

One way to avoid feeling like we're complaining or constantly explaining, is to teach important people around us, including our kids, what our pain scale signifies. Use the pain scale from 1 to 10 (1 being almost no pain sensation and 10 being the highest

level of pain) and give the numbers you tend to hover around your own designations and teach them to others.

For example, 5 might be the level of a light headache, and 7 might be the level of an deep toothache, while 10 might be a severe migraine or abscessed tooth. Obviously, you're not necessarily going to be experiencing those specific pains, but the person you're talking to might be able to relate better to how you're doing if you tell them in terms they can relate to.

For kids, 5 might be a bad tummy ache, 7 like you stubbed your toe, only all over, and 9 like you bonked your head really hard. Whatever works.

Then stick with these designations, so you can simply say, "I'm at a 7 today", and others will understand a little better how you're doing. Keeping the main designations at only 3 or 4 numbers helps everyone remember what they mean. Personally, I never went below a 5, so the numbers below 5 were useless to me anyway.

4. Clearly Communicate Your Limits

It's hard for people not experiencing constant pain to understand how debilitating it can be. Because your pain is basically invisible to others, people around you may tend to forget that you just aren't feeling up to par. They also may not understand that you're fatigued, running on empty, and not operating at full brain capacity and expect you to carry on as usual.

Kindly explain that you appreciate that they want you to be better, and that they want to include you in all the normal activities of life, but that you just don't have the capacity for that now.

Let them know that you have limited energy, limited brain power, and a limited attention span, due to pain. Tell them that you'd love to be able to do everything you used to do, but it's just not possible right now and you have to make careful choices every day.

Explain that you have maybe 3 main things you can do in a day now, not 50, and you have to choose those 3 things carefully. Once you've done 1 of them, you only have 2 left. Sometimes you might get it wrong and you really only can do 1 thing that day, or none. Ask them for their understanding, and let them know that you'll tell them when you've used up all your energy and that you appreciate their understanding.

5. Inform Others of Pain's "Side Effects"

If you've been in pain for any length of time, you've discovered that pain has ramifications beyond its physical discomfort. But unless they've lived with chronic pain themselves, the people around you won't necessarily know that these other symptoms are part of life with pain, so it's important that you let them know.

These "side effects" include memory loss, having the mind go suddenly blank in mid-sentence, extreme fatigue, irritability, sleep deprivation, overwhelm, and having all systems suddenly just shut down with a feeling of "I'm done now."

Letting the people around you know that you may suddenly have to rest, leave a conversation, end an activity, lose your focus, or be unable to retrieve a thought or a word because you're in chronic pain at least lets them know that your behavior is not because you're not interested in them or you don't care or you're not paying attention. It's because you simply can't take in very much and you reach the limits of your capacity very, very quickly.

See my free ebook, *Taking An Easier Path Through Pain* for further discussion on specific "side effects" of chronic pain and suggestions for handling them.