

# Pain Journaling: Clues to Fall Prevention and Movement Inhibition\*

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Pain is our body's way of sending us a message. Most often that message says things like "Stop", "Wait", "Be careful", "Something is wrong", or "Hey there, pay attention!" When we receive that message it captures our attention, and we try to respond appropriately to what we perceive is the specific message. If we are in motion, our first instinct is to alter or change the movement. If that pain is severe, we might, actually, totally withdraw our motor engagement and stop quickly. If the pain is accompanied by involuntary nerve and/or muscle enervation, our motor patterns may change without conscious planning. What might we do next? We could fall or lose balance on our way to a fall. Knowing about the pain patterns your clients experience can provide valuable insight into fall prevention.

## Falls and Pain

Falls are caused when an individual's weight is positioned in such a way as to become off center to its base of support. When weight is centered over the base, balance is achieved. Take that weight off center and balance falters and a fall may occur. As an individual feels him or herself begin to lose balance, he or she can regain a balanced state by moving weight back into a centered position. Most people do this almost continually, without even thinking of it.

However, if pain is present, that pain acts as an inhibitor to movement, weight cannot be moved into a stable position, and a fall occurs. If movement is a causative factor in the pain cycle, this compounds the problem, as the individual knows movement will cause pain. That knowing will result in mental inhibition of voluntary movement, further complicating the changes an individual has to make for regaining balance before a fall occurs.

Pain, in and of itself, will not make an individual fall. It is the restriction of movement that pain can cause that will keep the body from responding to changes in weight distribution. Inappropriate weight distribution causes falls. When the human body is off balance because weight is not centered over the base of support, the body must, through movement, change the weight distribution, or a fall will result.

Control the pain and greater freedom of movement will result. Greater freedom of movement will mean fewer falls. Journaling is one method of determining clues that can lead to lessening pain.

## Journaling Formats

Journaling can take several formats. *Free writing* is probably the easiest for the individual to do, but more difficult for the professional to gain information from. In free writing, the individual just writes a descriptive paragraph telling about the pain he or she experiences. The problem with free writing is that the individual might not include all pertinent information. Sometimes an individual might not think something is important. They might feel guilty. They might be embarrassed. However, for individuals who like to communicate, free writing might be a good choice.

Free writing can be assisted by writing prompts. A writing prompt starts a sentence, and leaves the completion of the sentence and/or elaboration to be completed by the individual. Free writing prompts related to pain might be –

- I feel the most pain free when. . .
- My pain starts when . . .
- My pain is made worse when. . .
- My pain stops when. . .
- After my aquatic activity my pain is. . .
- My pain is less when. . .
- When I feel pain I. . .
- My pain keeps me from. . .

If using free writing, prepare a set of directions for the individual to follow. For example –

*For the next week, it will be useful for you to keep a journal about the pain you are experiencing. Each day, write up to one page about your experiences. You can write less than one page if you want to. Try to be as specific as possible in what you write. Don't worry about your handwriting.*

*This journal will be confidential. It will not be shared with anyone unless you give your permission for that sharing. So, please write honestly. We will use the information to try to plan a program of activities to help you reduce pain.*

*Try to write at about the same time each day. Pick a quiet place where it will be just you and the writing task. Write what you remember, think, and feel. It is not necessary to ask anyone else to tell you what to write. However, if the actual task of writing is difficult for you, someone can do the writing for you. Just be sure what is written is what you want to say.*

*If you can't think of anything to write, here are some sample "starters" for you to use. You do not have to use these, they are just examples.*

- *I feel the most pain free when. . .*
- *My pain starts when . . .*
- *My pain is made worse when. . .*

*Bring your journal pages with you to your next session. We will look at your descriptions and use them in setting goals for reducing your pain.*

Then, using these directions, the individual does daily writing on his or her own paper or in a notebook.

**Topic writing** is a more specific form of journal writing. To implement topic writing, an individual is given a predetermined format for writing. This might be a set of pages with the format on each page and the date when the individual should do the writing, or it might be a laminated card with the

format on the card. The individual then copies the format into his or her own journal as he or she writes. A typical topical writing format might include –

- Describe your pain. How intense is it on a 1 to 10 scale with 10 being greatest pain. When does the pain start? What body parts are involved?
- Describe what was going on in your life when you experienced the pain. What were you doing? What were you thinking? What had you eaten? What did you drink? Was anyone else present?
- Describe what you did after you noticed the pain? Did you rest, work, read, sleep or do something else?
- How did aquatics affect your pain?
- Describe your environment during your pain. What was the weather? What activities were going on? Where were you?
- Was there anything unusual about your pain this time (or today)?

Using a ‘page a day’ system, a single page might look like this.

<p>Journal Date _____</p> <p>When was your pain the greatest today? What were you doing and how intense was the pain?</p> <p>What food did you eat today? Alcohol? Snacks? Treats?</p> <p>What physical activity/exercise did you do today?</p> <p>What was your outlook today? Happy? Sad? Upset?</p> <p>How did the pain change? When?</p> <p>What was the weather like today?</p>
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## Using Journaling Results

First, in order for the results of journaling to be useful, the individual doing the journal must write honestly. Attempting to hide real feelings and/or experiences serves no useful therapeutic purpose. To increase the potential for honesty, inform the individual that all journal writing will be kept confidential between you and the individual. A journal is not something to share with other family members or caregivers. Consider a journal part of confidential medical records and treat it as such.

Second, any health care provider should view a journal from an objective point of view. It is not the place of the health care provider to judge the content of the journal. What the healthcare provider should be looking for in reading the journal are keys to the pain cycle. Those keys can then be used to help reduce pain and facilitate fall-free movement. Specific clues to look for in reading a pain journal include –

- Level of pain.
- Activities generating increase in pain level.
- Activities generating a reduction in pain level.
- Time of day variances in comparison to pain levels.
- Pain triggers.
- Weather condition variances in comparison to pain levels.
- Mental state variances in comparison to pain levels.
- The mean, or average level of pain.
- The median, or middle level of pain experienced.
- The mode pain level, the pain level that appears most frequently.
- Food consumption variances in comparison to pain levels.
- Alcohol consumption variances in comparison to pain levels.
- Any solutions an individual used to reduce pain.
- Medications used and time of day taken.

Document the results of journaling on the *Journal Summary Documentation* form.

Once the journal has been read and you have clues about an individual's pain, you will be in a position to make recommendations regarding pain reduction. These might include –

- Referral to a medical doctor for treatment of a suspected condition affecting health and wellness.
- Lifestyle changes, such as changes in food or alcohol consumption, timing of medication, sleep schedule, activity selections, physical fitness.
- Therapeutic treatment, such as aquatic relaxation therapy, non-impact exercise, and/or movement facilitation.
- Behavioral counseling, such as stress reduction interventions, anger management, and/or relationship counseling.
- Self-help activities, such as mental imaging, postural relaxation, and/or positive affirmations.
- Environmental adjustments, such as different shoes or clothing, aid quality changes, humidity adjustments, and/or temperature adjustments.

Pain inhibits movement. Restricted movement leads to falls. Prevent falls by decreasing pain, freeing movement capability so the individual can respond to changes in walking surfaces, object manipulation, positioning, and interaction with his or her environment without endangering him or herself. Falls can be prevented by reducing pain. Journaling can provide the clues.

# Journal Summary Documentation

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Assessor \_\_\_\_\_

Dates Covered by Journal \_\_\_\_\_ Number of Entries \_\_\_\_\_

Body areas identified with pain as reported in this journal and type of pain (dull, sharp, stabbing, throbbing, tingling), right or left (if appropriate), and task specific behaviors associated (if known).

- \_\_\_\_\_ Head --
- \_\_\_\_\_ Neck --
- \_\_\_\_\_ Shoulders --
- \_\_\_\_\_ Arms --
- \_\_\_\_\_ Wrists --
- \_\_\_\_\_ Hands/fingers --
- \_\_\_\_\_ Chest --
- \_\_\_\_\_ Abdomen --
- \_\_\_\_\_ Hips --
- \_\_\_\_\_ Legs --
- \_\_\_\_\_ Ankles --
- \_\_\_\_\_ Feet/Toes --

Average pain level during entire period	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Average pain level during each day	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Median pain level during entire period	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Mode pain level during entire period	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Identified triggers to pain

_____ weather	_____ activity
_____ food	_____ attire
_____ psycho-social	_____ medicine

Exercise engagement – land \_\_\_\_\_ mild \_\_\_\_\_ moderate \_\_\_\_\_ strenuous

Exercise engagement – water \_\_\_\_\_ mild \_\_\_\_\_ moderate \_\_\_\_\_ strenuous

Hours of sleep per night average \_\_\_\_\_

General life stressors \_\_\_\_\_

Comments (use other side) \_\_\_\_\_