Lesson 2

**Common Problems When Becoming More Active**

It can be difficult to become more active when you have been limited for a while. It is difficult to exercise when you experience chronic pain and fatigue. Even those without chronic pain can find getting started in an exercise program difficult! However, we also know from years of clinical experience that becoming more active in a planned and rational way will increase your strength, endurance, and flexibility, and will ultimately decrease your pain.

Some readers of the previous edition of this book wrote to us to share their doubts and concerns about increasing their activity. Perhaps you have a few of these same doubts as well. This is how we responded to the concerns they raised.

**Concern**: *I worry that the exercise will make me feel even worse.*

**Response**:Remember, any new activity will temporarily increase discomfort. Work at a level that does not cause excessive pain while doing the exercise and afterwards. Gradually increase your efforts so that overuse or misuse does not result in more pain. Make sure to build in time for rest and recovery in your exercise plan. If the way you are doing the exercise causes pain or if you really fear that the activity will make you worse, review your activity plan with your doctor or physical therapist.

**Concern**: *I’ve always gotten bored easily doing exercise.*

**Response**:Boredom is sometimes a mask for frustration. It takes time to recondition the body, and many people get discouraged and give up before they see improvement. If this is not the case, however, find a more enjoyable environment or activity. Some people do better in *noncompetitive* fitness facilities, a place in which they are surrounded by others but not in competition with each other. Some do better alone. Set specific, reasonable goals each week and each time you exercise. Keep careful track of your activities so that you can see progress in black and white. Switch the location or group with whom you are exercising if you feel uncomfortable with the pace, group members, or setting.

**Concern**: *I’ve always relied on my pain to tell me when I’m exercising well or poorly. What can I rely on now if not my pain?*

**Response**:Pain is important to monitor when you are exercising or becoming more active in other ways. But it is not a useful guide to determine whether you are performing well. Especially in the beginning, it is better to rely on your level of effort. Later on, it will be better to focus on your ability to move further, easier, or longer as your guide for success.

**Concern**: *I always tend to do too much too fast. How can I stop doing this?*

**Response**:Doing too much, too fast is a common problem. Start slowly. Begin with easy repetitions with a relaxation pause of 5 to 10 seconds between repetitions. Do not use fast, jerky movements. Do the exercise just hard enough to feel a gentle stretch to the muscles. Do not apply force to the muscle so that you develop increased pain while you are stretching. Remember, building up your flexibility, endurance, and strength is an ongoing and gradual process.

Overdoing it one day will interfere with your progress on the next.

In short, make a reasonable plan, keep charts of your daily activity levels and do not give into the temptation to speed up toward your ultimate goal when you are experiencing success. Don’t think of exercising as a 100-meter dash but more of a marathon, where pacing is critical to a successful outcome.

**Concern**: *I don’t know how to exercise best so as not to hurt myself.*

**Response**: Exercise is a learned activity, just like driving a car. You may want to enlist the help of a physical therapist or a certified personal trainer who is experienced with people with disabilities and chronic pain to teach you technique. As you practice, check your technique with them and then in front of a mirror periodically. As in any sport, good practice makes you better, poor practice makes you worse!

**Concern**: *I’ve tried exercising before, but I always gave up. What’s going to be different* *this time?*

**Response***:* You know some of the obstacles that occurred in the past.Think of how you might overcome them. What will you do differently this time and what will you do if you meet an obstacle? Plan ahead. This time you will prepare yourself mentally. You may need time to experiment, but you will find a program of activity that fits your unique personality and circumstances.