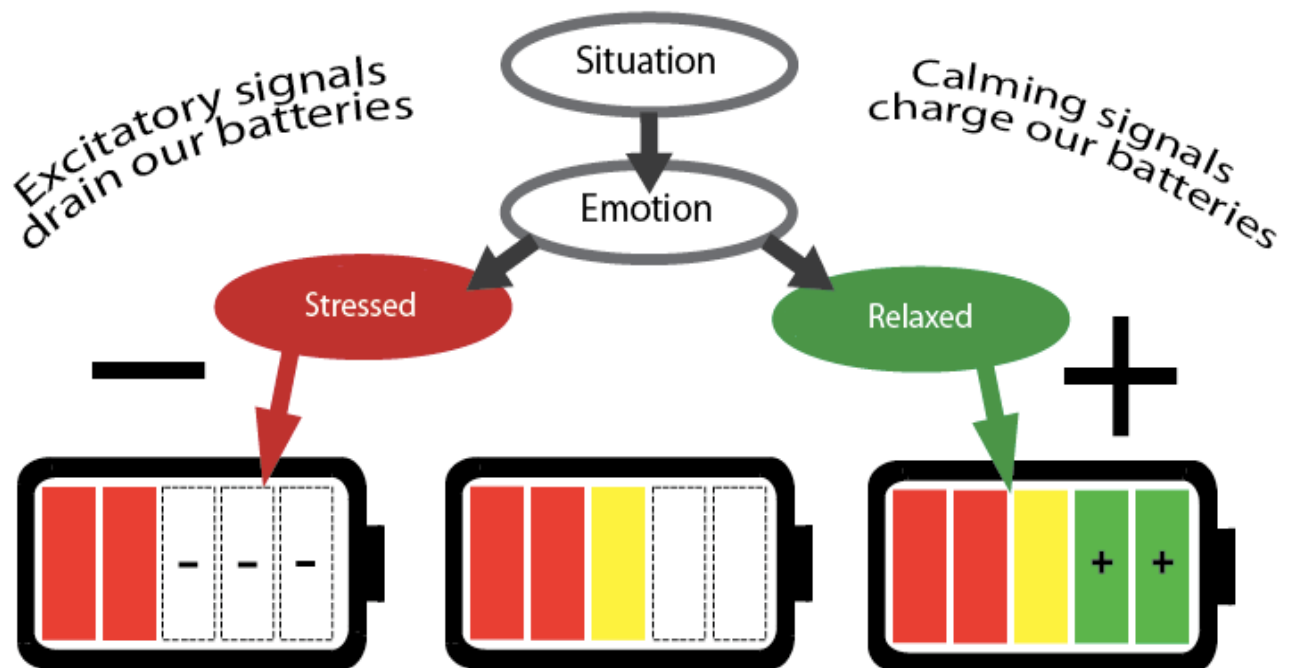


Dealing With Flare-Ups

You can help settle your nervous system by:

- Decreasing the excitatory signals in the nervous system
- Increasing the calming signals in the nervous system

Imagine that you have a battery.



Our battery gets low when we have too many **excitatory signals** and not enough **calming signals**. Our nervous system can become wound up, putting us at risk of having a flare-up. We don't have enough energy to deal with things that we could normally handle.

You may hear the medical words “plasticity of the nervous system”. This means that the nervous system can change. It does take time for this change but it can happen. Change happens through:

- How you move, how you stretch,
- By input through your skin, and
- What you think, see, and believe

To start, you first need to identify what’s increasing your excitatory signals so you can change them. When you do this, you have the ability to lower your pain, move better and improve how you live with pain.

Remember to take time to recharge.

What are some different ways you are learning to calm down your nervous system when your pain increases?

1. **Take a pause.** Notice your automatic thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations without reacting to them. Be present.
 - a. “I’m noticing a sharp pain in my low back and tingling in my left foot”, “I’m noticing a feeling of frustration”, “I’m noticing my mind is automatically thinking ‘this is terrible’”, “I’m noticing I’m holding my breath”
2. **Shift gears from reactive to reflective.** Ask yourself these questions:
 - a. Have I had this pain before?
 - b. Have I done anything *really* different?
 - c. If I’ve had this before and I’m not doing anything really different, could this increase in pain be related to my overprotective nervous system? Do I need this level of protection?

3. **Calmer breath.** What is your breathing like when your pain increases?
 - a. Do you hold your breath, take quick breaths, little gasps? These actions change the body's chemical balance, heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate.
 - b. Tell your nervous system that you are safe by **taking longer, calmer, softer belly (diaphragm) breaths**

4. **Calmer body.** What does your body automatically do when your pain increases?
 - a. Is there tension in your shoulders? Are your teeth clenched together? Is your face grimacing? Are you guarding/protecting a part of your body? Use mirrors if you need to.
 - b. Tell your nervous system that you are safe by **letting go of this tension**

5. **Calmer mind.** Can you change those automatic, racing thoughts?
 - a. "I hurt and I am ok", "I'm sore and I'm safe", "Motion is lotion", "Even though I can't do [insert activity], I can still do [insert activity]", "Even though I can't spend time with my kids the way I thought I would be, I can still have quality time with them in other ways", "I've dealt with this before and I can make it through again"
 - b. Tell your nervous system that you are safe by **ensuring your self-talk is realistic and calm.**

What are some other ways to calm down your nervous system? Here are a few strategies other people with pain have found helpful:

6. Find your baseline. Move to the pain, not through it. Pushing through the pain will only keep the nervous system firing.
7. Stretch. Hold a gentle stretch that you enjoy for 3 calm breaths.

8. Listen to or play music, or sing
9. Imagine a calming/relaxing scene
10. Meditate/pray/practice your spirituality
11. Change your position (e.g. stand up, sit down, use of rolls, different posture)
12. Do some movement that you enjoy, makes you feel safe, and that makes you feel like you're doing something for yourself: exercise, yoga, Tai Chi, walking, dancing, neural glides
13. Do an activity that connects you with loved ones
14. Use a heat or cold pack, TENS machine
15. Self-massage, self-trigger point therapy
16. Take a hot bath or shower
17. Do something that makes you laugh or smile
18. Pace yourself: change tasks, modify the task, take a short break
19. Hug a friend/family member/pet
20. Do a body scan
21. _____
22. _____
23. _____

**Remember to keep calmer breath, calmer body,
calmer mind throughout.**

Activity Pain Reaction Record

Pain situation (what were you doing when you had to stop activity because of pain): _____

Physical sensations: _____

Automatic thoughts. Describe the thoughts and images that went through your mind	What emotions did you feel?	What did you do? Describe you how reacted to the situation

What could you have done differently? Describe how you could have handled the situation differently to encourage calming down your nervous system.

Example Activity Pain Reaction Record

Pain situation: I was lifting my laundry basket onto the dryer and heard a crack.

Physical sensations: sharp pain in my back, spasms, tingling in left foot

Automatic thoughts. Describe the thoughts that went through your mind	What emotions did you feel?	What did you do? Describe you how reacted to the situation
"I'm right back to where I started" "Here we go again" "I can't do anything" "I'm useless"	Frustrated Angry Sad Ashamed	I stopped my chores and laid down to watch TV for the rest of the day

What could you have done differently?

- Notice my automatic thoughts and feelings. Acknowledge them without reacting to them and then...
- Take 5 belly breaths, each one calmer, longer, softer than the last
- Calm my body by dropping my shoulders
- Change my self-talk: "I've had this before and I'll get through it again", "I'm sore and I'm safe", "Even though I can't do this heavy chore, I can do some lighter chores"
- Do 5 C-Js while keeping calm breath, body, and mind
- Continue with some lighter chores later in the day

My Flare-up Toolkit – Wallet Copy

I will do the following whenever I have a flare-up:

1. **Take a pause** – notice automatic thoughts, sensations, and emotions.
2. **Shift gears** from reactive to reflective.
 - a. Have I had this pain before?
 - b. Have I done anything **really** different?
3. **Calmer breath** – longer, calmer, softer, belly breaths
4. **Calmer body** – drop my shoulders, unclench teeth, relax face
5. **Calmer mind** – “I’m sore and I’m safe”, “I hurt and I’m okay”, “I’ve gone through this before and I can get through it again”
6. And then I will:
 - a. _____
 - b. _____
 - c. _____