

Graded Exercise Therapy

‘To equip people affected by CFS / ME with the skills for self-management towards a better quality of life’.

Adult CFS / ME Service

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Many people with CFS/ME have been put off exercising and activity by previous ill-advised advice to go to the gym or similar, taking little account of their illness and current fitness levels. This may have been from someone with little knowledge of CFS/ME. Others have decided for themselves to resume exercise but have started at a level that relates more to their level of fitness before CFS/ME rather than to their current ability.

This booklet aims to help you understand the principles of a graded approach to exercise and activity and where to begin with increasing your ability to do more over time. This will be discussed in more detail during therapy sessions.

The benefits of exercise

Before discussing Graded exercise Therapy (GET) in further detail it is important to consider the benefits that exercise brings.

Regular exercise has many known benefits to people of all ages and with many differing medical conditions.

Exercise of an appropriate duration, intensity, and regularity is known to affect the following in a positive way:

- **Cardiovascular System**

Your heart, lungs, and circulation system work more efficiently, making your body more able to deal with the demands of daily activities. The improvements in the cardiovascular system can reduce your risks of certain diseases e.g. heart disease.

- **Strength**

Exercises that challenge your muscles, improve the strength of individual muscles and muscle groups, making some daily tasks easier, e.g. climbing stairs, hanging out the washing.



- **Endurance**

Exercises that are prolonged enable you to do more than you could previously, e.g. walk further, swim further, and do the housework for longer.

- **Flexibility**

Many exercises, especially those involving stretches (e.g. Yoga), can improve the flexibility of your joints, ligaments, and muscles helping you to move easier with less stiffness.

- **Balance**

Certain exercises can improve your balance, e.g. dancing, standing on one foot.

- **Immune system**

The right amount of exercise maintains and improves your immune system, essential for fighting viruses and infections.

- **Sleep**

A good night's sleep is essential in order to feel refreshed and wake up feeling better.



Exercise improves slow wave sleep, during which hormones are

released to repair your muscles.

- **Increase in bone density**

Exercises that involve putting weight through your legs (known as weight bearing exercises) help increase and maintain bone density, reducing your risk of broken bones and osteoporosis ('brittle bones').

- **Thinking ability (cognition)**

Graded Exercise Therapy for CFS/ME has been shown to improve thinking ability, or cognition.



- **Well-being and mood**

Exercise releases your own natural hormones in your body that can make you feel more relaxed and happy. It can therefore, be of particular help to people affected by depression or anxiety.

- **Putting stress hormones to good use**

Various natural substances are released into your bloodstream at times of stress, in order to prepare your body and muscles for physical action. Sometimes we are not physically active at times of stress, which can lead to certain symptoms, e.g. dizziness, muscle tension. Exercise can be an effective and positive way of utilising the physical preparation and helping to control certain physical symptoms.

- **Weight loss**

If you are overweight, aerobic exercise is an essential component to successful weight loss.

- **Body Image**

Exercise can make you feel better about your body.

- **Confidence**

Participating in exercise can improve your confidence, especially if you are learning something new and challenging, or returning back to an activity you previously enjoyed. A sense of achievement is important to everyone.

- **Social Contact**

Exercise can be a good way of establishing or re-establishing social contact.

What is graded exercise therapy (GET) and how will it help?

GET is the use of regular, physical exercise to aid recovery from CFS/ME. With regular exposure to a low level activity, the body begins to adapt and gradually increase an individual's tolerance to carrying out that activity.

GET works directly with an individual's level of current ability, and is directed by that person's own goals and objectives. In other words, the activity that an individual decides to work with is related to what they want to achieve.

For example, if a person would like to manage their home or garden better, GET helps to improve strength and movement to allow them to do this. If an individual would love to be able to walk their children to school or get back to playing an enjoyable sport, GET helps to gradually build up strength and fitness to achieve this goal.



Can exercise make me worse?

Any activity carried out to excess and beyond the capacity of that individual's current physical level has the potential to increase symptoms and make someone feel worse. To ensure that this doesn't happen, it is essential to start activities at a low level tailored to you and to build up gradually. Because you are starting at a level you can easily manage (even on 'bad' days) and then building up slowly at a rate that is right for your body, symptoms are controlled and kept to a minimum.

What is the right level of exercise for me?

The body adapts gradually to what is being asked of it. If you do less you will become less fit. If you continue to do about the same your fitness will remain constant. To get fitter you need to be regularly doing just a bit more than you normally do. If you do a lot more you will experience a level of discomfort that will discourage you from trying again. The most difficult aspect of getting fitter after CFS/ME may be coming to terms with a very low starting amount of exercise and being patient about increasing this slowly. Getting fitter does not mean you have to start jogging or go to the gym. It involves doing a small amount more than you are doing at present, doing it regularly and building up gradually. A small amount extra, done regularly, will be the most effective way of getting fitter.

What should my GET programme consist of?

1. Setting realistic goals. Goals that are important and meaningful to you.

2. Stabilising your physical activity will provide the foundations for GET - this means helping you to work out a consistent pattern of physical activity before increasing exercise.

3. Gentle stretches are often a good start for exercise, as these can help your muscles to feel more comfortable and help prepare them for activity. You may wish to plan a stretching programme to start with, before you look at adding activity.

4. Plan an initial activity that is realistic- one that you enjoy or one that is necessary in your life. This should be an additional activity to your normal, everyday activity. The purpose is to challenge your body slightly so that it strengthens.

5. This activity is started at a level that you know you can do manageably every day, even on your bad days, on at least 5 days out of 7.

6. Once this can be done consistently (of course, this should feel OK, because the level you choose is an easily manageable one), the time you do this activity for can be increased slightly. The increases you consider are very small: e.g. a 5-minute walk becomes 6 minutes. An increase from 5 to 10 minutes would not be advisable as this is an enormous 100% increase; our bodies tend only to be happy with increases of around 20%.

7. Getting started might seem difficult, possibly creating manageable feelings of stiffness or fatigue as a normal physiological response to activity. After a few days of maintaining the activity at this new level, these responses subside as the body adapts and strengthens. Gentle stretches can help minimise any stiffness and keep you supple.

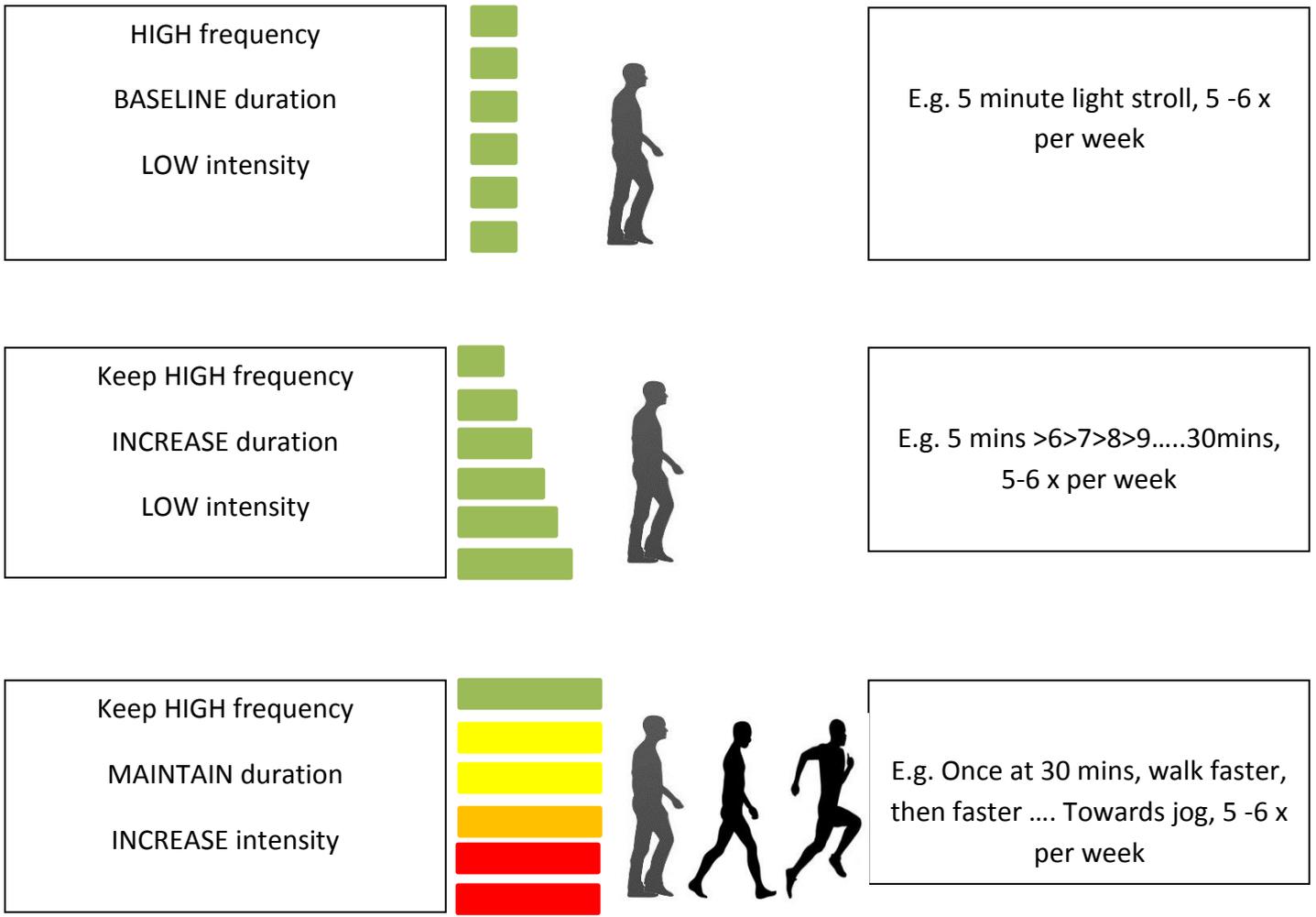
8. Keep to this level of activity until you are used to it and it feels OK.

9. Once it feels OK (you're getting stronger!), another small increase in time can be added.

10. When you can do an activity for a good length of time at a comfortable pace, e.g. 30 minutes, it is then helpful to start increasing the intensity of the activity. This might mean walking slightly faster for part of the time, for example.



If it can't be done every day, then the starting level is too high



This process may take anywhere from weeks to months – the process is slow and steady; patience and keeping your brakes on may be just as important as increasing activity.

What activity should I choose?

The key to this decision is to choose a realistic, regular, and enjoyable activity. Many people start with walking because it is one of the main physical activities we undertake. Depending on how people are affected by CFS/ME and what they wish to achieve, someone might start by using physical activities around the home, while others may wish to go out for a daily walk. Those interested in sports may be more inclined to use cycling or swimming, for example.

Case example: Zoe can walk for 20 minutes three days per week but on a bad day she can only manage 10 minutes. **Zoe’s exercise baseline would be 10 minutes,** five days per week. This is achievable even when she is not feeling at her best.

Some days your exercise may seem easy and it is tempting to do more. Don’t. At this stage you should stick to your exercise baseline to avoid a boom-bust pattern.

Do what you have planned to do, not what you feel you can do. It is important that your activity is undertaken at an easy and gentle pace. Increases in exercise duration and intensity will come later.

You should take a short rest after exercise. This gives time for your muscles and cardiovascular system to recover before your next activity and allows you to relax. However, you should avoid resting for longer than 30 minutes and try to avoid falling asleep.

I tried to increase my exercise before and it didn't work.

In the past you may have been unable to improve your symptoms using an exercise programme, or you might have felt that exercise aggravated some of your symptoms. There may be a number of reasons why exercise did not work for you before. You may have started at too high a level of physical exercise, or increased the amount you did too quickly. You may have used an exercise that was too challenging for you now such as jogging, which you could do perfectly well before you became unwell.



Or maybe you added exercise in before you had stabilised your daily routine and learned to pace yourself, and while you were not getting enough good quality sleep or were stressed, these things could also have led to a bad experience of exercise.

Exercise:

- **Which of the following best describes you?**

A. I spend most of my time resting at home. Yes/No

B. At times I push myself hard then rest for long periods to recover. Yes/No

If it is A improving your fitness will involve making a very small increase to what you are doing, for example adding in 2-3 stretch exercises per day each done once without repetitions. This would only take 15-30 seconds per day. You can then build this up gradually adding in one extra stretch after a couple of weeks and increasing slowly. Even this may cause some initial discomfort, but this is not dangerous and will subside as your body adjusts to what you are asking it to do. Over a period of months you can extend the stretching regime and then start to add other exercise such as a walk down the garden and back.

For some people this will be too slow, it depends on what your starting point is. So if you can already walk for 10 minutes most days without much difficulty, for example, you would start from that point and gradually increase it to 11 minutes and later 12 minutes. If you have a CFS/ME specialist or therapist it would be good to discuss this with them.

If the answer is B it is not feasible to start adding more activity to your schedule until you have your present activity under control. This means having a fairly regular pattern of activity and not alternating excessively active days with days of exhausted rest (boom and bust pattern). There needs to be a degree of confidence that you have a bit of spare energy to invest in getting fitter. If you answered B what do you need to do to get things onto a more even keel so that you can start to move forward? (Breaking up activities, resting at regular intervals for example).

Summary

The first section has discussed the benefits of exercise. For someone with a diagnosis of CFS/ME exercise should be considered an important strategy in building strength and fitness. Reintroduction of exercise should be done using a graded approach, with thought around the meaning of the exercise or activity for you. It should relate to your own particular circumstances and be progressed according to your individual needs. Forming a foundation (baseline) from which to increase your exercise is an essential starting point of the GET process.

Guidelines for choosing exercise and physical activity

The activities you undertake should be:

Relevant: Exercise should relate to an activity you enjoy (e.g. visiting museums/ enjoying social outings) or an activity you need to do in your daily life e.g. housework, walking to the bus.

Regular: To make changes and maintain them, exercise needs to be done regularly and fit into your everyday life; it is a long-term lifestyle change – not a ‘quick fix’.

Realistic: Be sure that you are not aiming too high and attempting to do exercise that is beyond your current capacity. However, you may well be able to work up to your ‘goal exercise’ (e.g. joining a fitness class/playing football with friends) if you follow the concepts of Graded Exercise Therapy carefully.

Enjoyable: What do you really enjoy doing? Sometimes exercising in a group/ with your friends/ family can be more enjoyable.

Exercise can be about ‘sporting activities’

- Walking or cycling: for pleasure, to the bus stop, shops etc.
- Sporting activities e.g. football, swimming, cycling
- Home-based exercise programs or going to the gym



Exercise can also include



- Housework: e.g. Cleaning / vacuuming / putting on a duvet cover!
- Gardening, DIY; decorating and home maintenance
- Climbing stairs
- Playing with children/ grandchildren, e.g. playing 'catch' or football

- Yoga, Pilates, Tai Chi

The activities can be classified as 'aerobic exercise' if they make you feel breathless and are raising your heart rate.

Setting goals

Considering your long term goals and breaking these into more manageable shorter term goals can help you to stay motivated and on the right track with your GET programme.

Long-term goals

These goals are the things you would like to be doing again in the future. For example, some people's goals are:

- Walking to the shops three times a week.
- Riding an exercise bike for twenty minutes every day.
- Weeding the garden for an hour at a time.
- Managing to vacuum the home all in one go.
- Swimming 20 lengths three times a week.

Short-term goals

It is helpful to break these long-term goals into smaller components – For example, the goal above regarding walking to the shop could be broken down into walking half way to the shops in ten weeks' time. This goal is then broken down further into weekly or fortnightly exercise goals.

Your goals should be SMART

Specific - exactly what do I want to do, where and with whom?

Measurable - how far, how long for and how often?



Achievable - are my goals within my reach? Not necessarily immediately, but gradually, as my capabilities and confidence grow

Relevant - to me, they need to be important to me.

Time related - by when?

Exercise and physical activity questionnaire

There are different types of exercise: this worksheet aims to help you work out what type of exercise is important to you, and which exercise you are not so keen on. The exercise questionnaire should help you to formulate goals that are important to you:

1. 'Every-day changes' Exercise/Physical activity:

This category reflects exercise that you could add to your daily routine. It is not an extra 'sport' type exercise. For example, getting off the bus the stop before, making use of the stairs instead of a lift, taking a detour on the way back from shopping, walking to the shop daily for milk instead of having it delivered etc.

Could any of these or other similar activities, be appropriate for you? (Please list)

- a)
- b)
- c)
- d)
- e)

2. 'Sports-type' Exercise

Are you interested in any sports, or in attending exercise classes? Would you like to be able to join a local gym? Would you like to join a walking or cycling group near you? How about getting back into an exercise video or DVD you once enjoyed? Would you like to get back to playing football with friends or playing tennis with children?

Could any of these or other similar activities, be appropriate for you? (Please list)

- a)
- b)
- c)
- d)
- e)

3. 'Around the home' Exercise

Do you have any physically demanding tasks around the home; tasks that might make you feel breathless when you do them? E.g. Gardening, Do-It-Yourself projects, housework? Do simple tasks like getting dressed or washed have this effect?

Would you like to work towards any of these activities? (Please list)

- a)
- b)
- c)
- d)
- e)

4. Is there any exercise that you would prefer NOT to do? (Please state)

5. Apart from improving your CFS/ME symptoms, what other benefits of exercise interest you?

- a) Improved sleep ..
- b) Improved ability to do more activity ..
- c) Improved immune system ..
- d) Weight loss / control ..
- e) Prevention of osteoporosis ..
- f) A healthier heart ..
- g) Improved breathing / less breathlessness..
- h) Improved body image and confidence..
- i) Ability to exercise with children/ family..
- j) Ability to exercise socially ..
- k) Feeling better in spirits ..
- l) Greater stamina ..
- m) Greater energy ..
- n) Greater strength

The space below is for you to use to consider some GET goals:

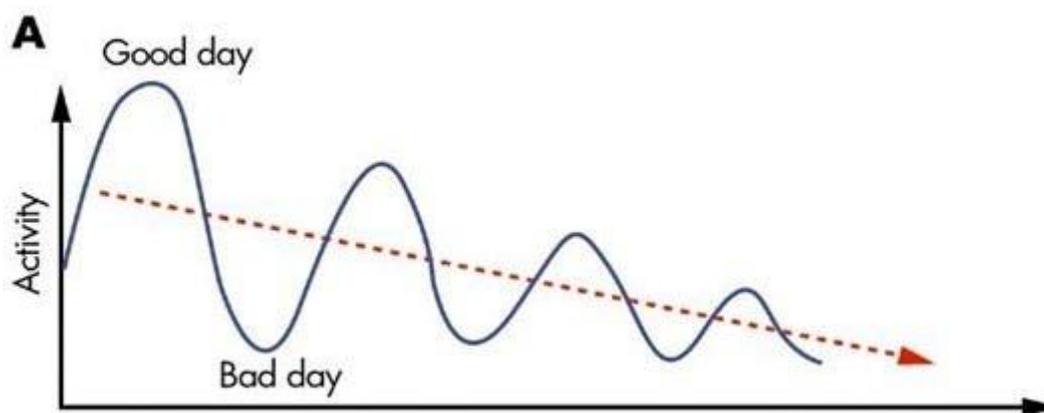
Stabilising Physical activity

A very common factor that contributes to the maintenance of CFS/ME is reduced activity and increased rest. As we explained in the section “Explaining CFS/ME”, the less your body does, the less your body gets used to doing. As a result physical changes within your body occur. These changes cause an increase in unpleasant symptoms that can be very distressing and often lead people to an erratic pattern of rest and activity dependent on how they feel.

Your symptoms may be so severe that you spend much of your time confined to home and your days and nights run into each other. You may find that any activity is exhausting, e.g. brushing your hair, talking, walking to the shops, or doing the washing.

On the other hand, you may find that you can be reasonably active on some days, but as a result of “doing too much”, you become more fatigued and symptomatic resulting in being unable to do very much on other days. This is what we refer to as a “boom bust pattern”.

For these reasons it is crucial that the first step of your graded activity programme is stabilising your physical activity. This may mean even doing a little less activity but more consistently than you were doing before. Through this, your body is given time to adapt to the amount of activity it is doing and as a result you’re not constantly trying to recover from symptoms.



General advice for stretching



Why is stretching helpful?

Regular stretching will help to keep your muscles, ligaments and joints flexible and supple.

They need to be supple in order to let you move freely, without pulling uncomfortably. They can 'stiffen up' if you have been in a position for a long period of time, or if you have been generally less active than normal. As muscles and ligaments can actually shrink in length, they may be uncomfortable or painful when they are pulled as part of normal every-day activity. However, the good news is that with regular stretching, you can feel much suppler and this can make your muscles feel more comfortable. Many people with CFS/ME report how much better they feel when stretching regularly.

When should I stretch?

You will see improvements only if you stretch regularly. You might start by stretching just once a day, but work up to stretching frequently. It is useful to stretch at the following times:

1. After a warm bath in the evenings: the warm water will soften your muscles and mean you can stretch a bit further and more comfortably.
2. If you are in one position for a long time, e.g. at a computer, lying down, or sitting. It is important to stretch every half an hour or so if you are in one position for a long time.
3. At regular opportunities during the day, e.g. waiting for the kettle to boil, watching TV etc.
4. Before and after any aerobic exercise or difficult physical activities, e.g. DIY, gardening.

What should stretches feel like?

Many people report that they feel more comfortable and flexible after they have stretched, and often people feel more relaxed. However, as you are stretching muscles that may be tightened, stretching may feel uncomfortable at the time of the exercise. Stretches should not lead to a pain that stays with you for a long time after the stretch. If you find this, please consult your physiotherapist who can help to alter the stretch for you.

Where should I start?

- When you first start to stretch, stretch gently, slowly and smoothly. As your body gets suppler you will find you will be able to stretch further.

- Start by holding your stretches for as long as feels comfortable (maybe 2-5 seconds), with the view of eventually working up towards 10 seconds. You might start by just doing one of each stretch, but will then work this up gradually.
- Over time you will find these stretches will become easier.

Never “bounce” when stretching. Stretches should be slow, smooth and sustained at all times.

The normal response to exercise

The following signs and feelings are normal reactions during exercise; they show you that you are working at the right level to make real positive changes to your body. If you do not feel any of these when exercising, you will not be making any positive changes to your body.

Increased breathing rate

Your breathing will become faster than normal, to a rate that you are able to control. This is to supply your muscles with more oxygen because they are working harder than usual.

Increased heart rate

You may feel your heart rate increasing: Your heart will beat faster in order to pump the extra oxygen around your body to provide for your muscles.



Body parts turning red in colour

Your face, arms, legs, or other body parts may turn red in colour during and after exercise. This is because there is more blood being supplied to the muscles beneath the surface of your skin. It is also because your blood vessels move towards the surface when you are warm to help keep you cool.

Sweating

Sweating is your way of helping to control your body temperature; as you become warmer on exercise, the sweat evaporates and it cools you down.



Increased temperature

You will feel warmer all over your body, as your muscles are working harder and giving off more heat.

‘Jelly feeling’, especially in arms and legs.

You may feel like your arms or legs are a little shaky or feel like jelly. When you stop exercise and rest this feeling should gradually reduce and stop.

Normal response after exercising

After exercise, your heart and breathing rate will gradually slow down to their normal resting rates. You may also feel the following as part of a normal reaction after exercise:

Heaviness feeling

After your muscles have worked hard, they are likely to feel heavy.

Stiffness feelings in muscles. These come in varying degrees; a mild stiffness is normal and is associated with positive changes. Stiffness should gradually improve and should not last long. A good warm up and warm down will help reduce these feelings.

Stiffness feelings are associated with a build-up of a normal by-product of exercise, known as lactic acid. Lactic acid gradually gets washed out of your muscles after exercise by your bloodstream. You can help this process and feel more comfortable by having a long, warm bath followed by gentle stretching exercises. Gentle movement, e.g. walking, can also help.

- Moderate or Intense stiffness – these feelings do not indicate harm to your body, but as they are uncomfortable, you may need to adjust your programme.

Natural tiredness

Exercise will make you feel a normal and natural tiredness and will help improve sleep: this tiredness may feel more intense than usual in somebody with CFS/ME.

Rare adverse reactions to exercise

IF YOU GET ANY OF THESE SIGNS DURING EXERCISE, STOP EXERCISING AND DISCUSS WITH YOUR GP.

- Breathing becoming out of control
- Wheezing
- Chest pains
- Collapse or faintness
- Injuries

If you feel anything else that is making you feel uncomfortable during exercise be sure to discuss concerns with us further.

General advice for strengthening

Why do strengthening exercises?

As well as your body being generally physically fitter, muscles also need to be strong to enable you to do physical activities during the day. It takes muscle strength to climb the stairs, for example, or to wash your hair or do gardening tasks at home. It is also important to strengthen muscles if you are re-starting to exercise or trying a new physical activity or sport, so that you are strong enough to be able to do it. In essence: a stronger muscle will let you do more of the things you want to do.



How often should I do strengthening exercises?

It is best to try to work up to doing strengthening exercises daily if you can. However, you might start by doing them every second day to start with. It is better to do fewer repetitions more regularly than to do a long session all at once.

Where should I begin?

You are probably best to start with a low number of repetitions and then build up slowly, in the same way as you have increased your aerobic exercise.

When should I do strengthening exercises?

You can choose whether you would like to do them either all in one session, with maybe some rest breaks in between, or spread out throughout the day.

What should muscle strengthening feel like?

At the time, a strengthening exercise is likely to feel quite hard, and you may feel a burning sensation, a “heaviness” or a “jelly feeling” in the muscle. It is at this stage that the muscle can get a message to the brain to build more muscle fibres and make you stronger. As with stretches, although strengthening exercises may feel uncomfortable at the time, they should not give you sharp pain, or pain that gets worse over time.

Motivating yourself

Different things motivate different people. For some, the most satisfaction comes from seeing themselves achieve their goals; for others, they may enjoy telling others about their progress. Here are some ideas that may help you to keep to your programme:

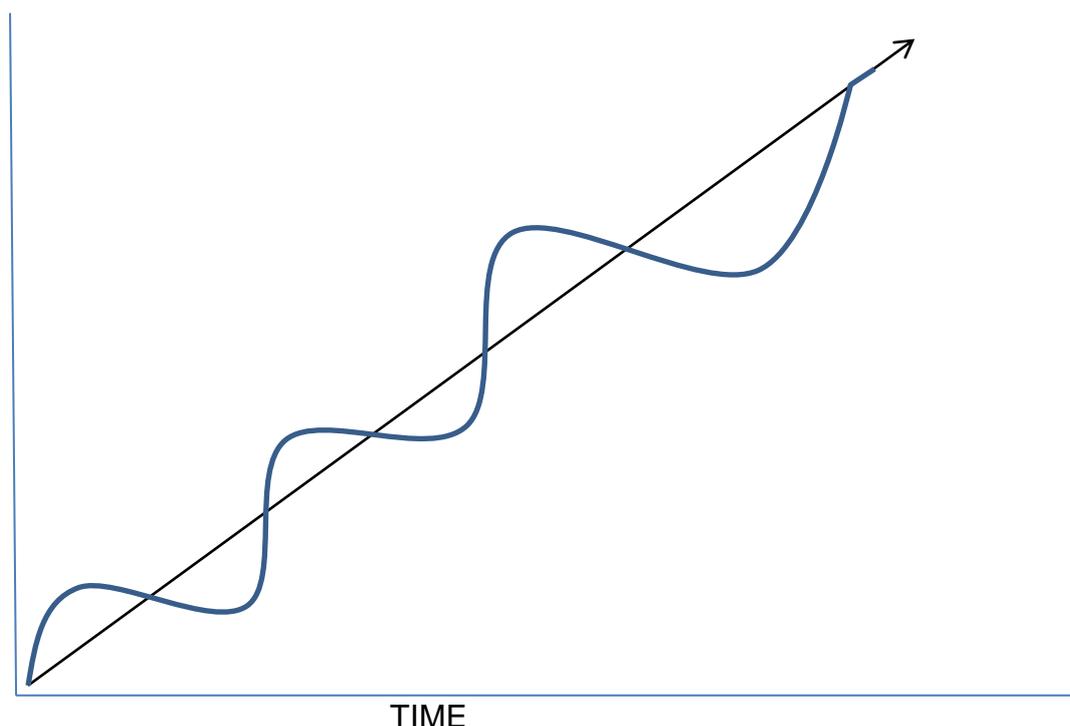
1. Keep a written plan at all times
2. Write down details of your exercise or physical activity achievements
3. Keep lists of plans and tick them off once you have done them

4. Keep a diary outlining all the things you learn from your GET programme
5. Tell friends and family about your plans and progress
6. Reward yourself when you have stuck to your plans, e.g. putting some money aside every time you undertake your plan and save for something special
7. Frequently go over your written plans and old exercise sheets and see the progress you have made
8. Become familiar with the GET theory
9. Draw a graph of the progress you are making so that you can see your exercise time going up
10. Do your activity or exercise with other people: walking at lunchtime with a colleague can be more motivating than going out alone
11. Become involved in a club or gym, if so advised, so that you can become committed to your plans and enjoy them with others, e.g. sports club or team, gardening group, walking group.

Dealing with setbacks

Setbacks are a normal part of getting better. Learning from setbacks and making changes to avoid them or cope with them better is an essential component to you feeling better.

Therapy usually follows an 'up and down' pattern, but with an overall upwards trend:



The good news: it is normal for setbacks to become less severe, more manageable and last for less time as you get better. It is important to remember that despite a setback, creating a 'dip' (as seen above in the graph); the overall trend is usually upwards. It can be useful to remind yourself of the progress you have made at this time to ensure you can see the overall upward trend during a difficult time.

What is a setback?

You may be familiar with setbacks: in this context, we are referring to an increase in symptoms that occurs, usually after an increase in activity or for some other reason that significantly affects your ability to undertake activity for as time-limited period. The cause, severity and duration of setbacks can be variable.

How can I tell the difference between a setback and other illnesses?



A setback usually involves a worsening of your normal CFS/ME symptoms, or sometimes can involve additional symptoms that you may already be familiar with. However, sometimes it can be difficult to tell the difference between these symptoms and something else, like a cold or 'flu, as the symptoms can be very similar, e.g. sore throat, aching muscles, headaches. It is important to try to tell the difference between these

as you may do different things in different cases to get better.

To help work out the difference, it can be helpful to think about the symptoms you are getting: are the symptoms your normal CFS/ME symptoms in a more intense form, or are there different symptoms common to illnesses such as a cold? Do you have a runny nose, for instance – or are you sneezing after visiting children who have had a cold? Do you have a cough that involves phlegm in your chest? Do you have a high temperature after measuring it with a thermometer? (Sometimes we can feel hot, but not objectively have a raised temperature).

If you have a cold/cough then it is useful to reduce what you are doing for a short while and not exercise at a high intensity: try to go out for a short walk every day and maintain as much physical activity as you can without making you feel worse. Then, build up your activity as soon as you can, in a gradual way, as soon as you can – usually after a few days. However, if you are not feeling well due to a CFS/ME setback, then the advice is different:

Dealing with a CFS/ME setback: what should I do?

During a CFE/ME setback, it is understandable that you might wish to rest and reduce the amount of activity you do, because you don't feel well and activity feels much harder than usual. This may even be a time in which you become concerned that the increase in symptoms may be causing you damage.

Evidence in fact suggests the opposite: there is no evidence to suggest that an increase in symptoms is causing you harm. It is certainly uncomfortable and unpleasant, but not harmful. In fact, there is much evidence to support the alternate view: if you rest too much, it is the resting that can cause negative changes in the body. Resting and withdrawing from activity can also make us feel fed up or worried, and this can also make it harder to continue being active.

The periods of excessive rest can be a time when the body adjusts to the lower level of activity and weakens: if the body weakens further, it can become more sensitive to activity and make overall symptoms worse. Therefore, during a setback it is useful to maintain as much physical activity as you can. This is to avoid the weakening and tightening of muscles, and the reduction in fitness, which can occur surprisingly quickly (we can lose 10 % of our muscle strength in just one week of bed-rest, or even 1% per day). Therefore, if at all possible, try to keep to your exercise and activity plan, knowing that in time your body will adjust.

Of course, if you are having a very severe setback, in which your previous level of activity is leading to distressing or unmanageable symptoms, then reducing activity slightly and increasing rest might be a temporary solution, as long as you build up again as soon as you can to your previous level. Building up again should ideally occur within a few days to avoid the detrimental effects of rest. Reducing activity should be avoided if at all possible.

It can be helpful to use other strategies during a setback, such as muscle relaxation, or gentle stretches that can relieve discomfort. Warm baths can also help your muscles feel more comfortable. It is also useful to try to avoid extra sleeping where possible, as this can make it harder for you to get back into physical activity.

Thinking about the future: Maintaining positive changes

This GET information will equip you with a great deal of knowledge about your condition and how to manage it by taking notice of your physical activity and exercise. It is useful to think about how you will maintain the changes you have made and how you may continue to get stronger in the future.

Try to be aware of the reasons behind making certain decisions about exercise, and become familiar with the process of increasing physical activity.

Involving friends and family

It can be very helpful to tell friends and family your plans and the goals that you are heading towards, and to share your progress with others. Involving an exercise 'buddy' that has an understanding of your CFS/ME symptoms could help to motivate you with your exercise goals.

Keeping written records for yourself

It is a good idea to keep a book or diary to write in, to track your progress and journey with your GET goals.

Thinking about your onward plans and goals

It can be useful to keep setting yourself goals and challenges to focus your ongoing recovery after you have been discharged from the team. Continue to use weekly planners to track your ongoing recovery and progress.

Review the questionnaire from this booklet again to help you work out where to go from here. You might decide that you wish to join a sports club or gym for example, now that you are stronger, or perhaps you have decided that the goal you first decided upon is no longer appropriate or relevant.

Continuing to challenge yourself can give you the focus and motivation to continue to improve from here.

Maintaining your physical capacity

Your improvements will continue as long as you maintain your level of activity and exercise. It is crucially important not to stop exercising after discharge, but rather to continue maintaining or building upon the changes you have made. Establishing a routine of physical activity and exercise is an important part of the package in keeping your good health and preventing/reducing symptoms in the future.

Frequently asked questions

Below are a number of frequently asked questions regarding Graded Exercise Therapy.

What happens if I don't like exercise?

No problem. The important thing to know is that you can choose any form of activity – for example DIY, household jobs, craft work or gardening.

What type of activity or exercise do I have to do?

This is really up to you! This may include any hobbies such as gardening, household chores such as hanging clothes on the line, or any form of exercise from tai chi to swimming. Use the questionnaire in the booklet to help you consider ways of adding exercise to your current routine.

Do I have to do it by myself?

No. If you would like to do your particular activity with others e.g. go for a walk with your partner or go swimming with your friends then absolutely do so. In fact, doing your activity may be more enjoyable for you and can often help with motivation.

What happens if I don't have time?

It is understandable that life can get very busy with work, family commitments, household jobs and friends. It is important to think about how the exercise/activity will fit your particular lifestyle. Remember that GET may include every day activities as your exercise such as hanging washing on the line, cleaning the house, DIY or gardening.

How do I keep myself motivated?

There are a number of ways to ensure you keep yourself motivated and achieve the goals you will have set for yourself. Exercise or activity with friends can be very motivating & enjoyable as mentioned above, even walking the dog can be an incentive! Sticking to a routine each day can also help you to remember to do your activity.

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