Patients with long term chronic pain often gradually lose capabilities in many areas of their life. They tend to avoid activities that might cause discomfort. They may withdraw socially which can cause or add to depression and anxiety. They may not take care of themselves and have poor nutrition. All these things can amplify the pain they experience. The good news is that patients can also recover their capabilities if they work on improving these areas of their life. As these areas improve, patients are likely to see a reduction in the pain they experience and a general improvement in their well-being and function.

Help patients understand how pain works – This video explains that people often believe that pain is only a bottom-up process, where the brain receives sensory inputs from the body from tissue damage, triggering pain. But there’s also a top-down process whereby the brain itself can change the pain experience. For example, stress, depression, anxiety, lack of sleep, and poor nutrition can all make pain worse independent of tissue damage. Improving mood, sleep, and nutrition can make pain better, again independent of tissue damage. Life-style improvements help reduce pain. Patients learn what can cause pain, what can reduce pain, and what they can do to improve their life despite having pain. Encourage your patient to watch this video to learn how pain works.

Encourage regular, restful sleep – Most patients with chronic pain sleep poorly. Lack of sleep causes irritability, memory issues, trouble concentrating, and poor balance. It can amplify depression and anxiety, weaken the immune system, lower sex drive, and cause high blood pressure. Getting good, restful sleep on a regular basis can have a very positive effect on pain. Check if your patient has problems sleeping. If they do, have them watch this video. Work with them to improve their sleep.

Promote healthy activities – Patients with chronic pain may avoid activity for fear of re-injuring themselves. Their brains can be overly protective, equating hurt with harm. Gradually their bodies lose fitness and even simple tasks can become exhausting. It is important that patients re-engage in physical activities as tolerated. They need to pace themselves to avoid flare-ups caused by overdoing things. Encourage your patient to watch this video on being active.

Maintain a positive mood – Mood, stress, and pain are closely linked. Chronic pain can cause depression, anxiety, and anger. Stress can trigger the body’s stress response system, increasing heart rate and blood pressure and causing muscles to tense up. When patients work on improving mood, many other aspects of their life improve as well. Patients can learn to be more positive and reduce stress. Several techniques can help, such as practicing mindfulness or meditation, reframing negative thoughts, and engaging in social activities. Encourage your patient to watch this video on improving mood.

Foster social connections – Patients with persistent pain often withdraw socially. Social isolation can cause them to focus more on their pain which in turn can intensify depression, anxiety, and anger. When patients start reconnecting with old friends and make new social connections, their sense of self-worth improves. New social connections which involve new activities are especially helpful. If your patient has withdrawn socially, have them watch this video. Then explore with them how they can expand their social life.

The good news is that when patients make healthy lifestyle changes, they usually have reduced pain and their well-being and function is improved.
Other Strategies for Coping with Pain

**Make good nutritional choices** – Nutrition is often overlooked as part of a treatment plan. A healthy gut microbiome is critical to our general health. Poor nutrition can cause inflammation and visceral pain. Good nutrition can help alleviate constipation and other side effects of medication. Discuss with your patient their eating habits and the importance of a healthy gut microbiome. Encourage them to watch this video on healthy nutrition.

**Consider non-opioid pain medications** – Although no medication is without risk, medications like ibuprofen and acetaminophen have been shown to help with pain. In general, these medications are safer than opioids and should be considered as possible alternatives. Encourage your patient to watch this video on non-opioid pain medications.

**Plan for flareups** – For people with chronic pain, flareups are common. They can come on suddenly and cause intense pain lasting for hours or days. Patients are very concerned that something new is wrong with them. This can cause depression, anxiety, and anger. All these emotions just amplify the pain. Patients may even go to the emergency department. With education, patients can learn to become detectives and investigate possible causes or triggers. They can learn what steps they can take to anticipate and moderate their flareups. If your patient has problems with flareups, have them watch this video.