

Session 6: Pleasant Activities 1

Many Veterans living with chronic pain tend to avoid engaging in activity, including enjoyable activities. One reason may be that they believe they are no longer able to do the things they once enjoyed, such as golf or gardening, because of pain. Since activities often include interacting with others, they may want to avoid talking about their pain or feel embarrassed about their limitations. Not only may this avoidance contribute to physical deconditioning, but it can also lead to lowered self-esteem and increased depressed mood.

Sessions 6 and 7 are designed to help Veterans increase the number of pleasant activities in their lives. The benefits include providing opportunities for healthy distraction, increasing socialization, improving concentration, and developing a sense of purposeful direction.

Session 6 will provide the opportunity to articulate and clarify what types of activities Veterans have enjoyed historically while exploring new ideas for the future. Session 7 will create an action plan to implement activities in a paced manner.

Session 6 Agenda

✓	Administer SUDS.
✓	Establish agenda.
✓	Review Session 5 and do visualization exercise.
✓	Present Session 6 content: Exploring pleasant activities.
✓	Discuss home practice.

Session 6 Materials

- Guided Imagery Handout
- Pleasant Activities List

Guided Imagery

After reviewing home practice of the relaxation techniques from Session 5, begin this session with the guided imagery exercise. Ask Veterans for information about the idyllic place that they would like to mentally visit, reminding them that the place should be peaceful and calm, with positive associations. While the majority of this session will be focused on exploring pleasant activities, starting with thoughts and images about a pleasing place that create a relaxed state will set the stage for gathering that information.

Veterans' choices for this technique may vary widely – some may find the beach or mountains relaxing, others may have a city of which they are fond. Some may have a specific location/time such as a childhood memory of grandma's kitchen while she bakes cookies or being on a farm with a sibling. Allow the Veteran flexibility and creativity in selecting the location. The key to developing a deeply immersive experience, where the Veteran completely engages in the imagery exercise, is to give full attention to all the specific details of the scene. Encourage a focus on detailed images that take the Veteran away from stressful thoughts and bodily tension. It is crucial to involve all five senses, to consider specifically what would be seen, heard, smelled, felt, and tasted in this location (e.g., white sand path beneath feet, sweet and sour taste of cold lemonade, vivid color of tree leaves, soft texture of blanket, smell of cookies baking).

Once the mental scene and the details of the patient's relaxing place are gathered, guide Veterans through the steps below. A sample for the therapist is presented below. Please refer to the Guided Imagery Handout for a sample script of this exercise.

STEPS

- Begin with comfortable posture and relaxed breath with eyes closed or gaze fixed.
- Imagine the "entryway" into the location (e.g., path, door, staircase, lake dock.)
- Enter the relaxing place (focus on five senses).
- Spend 5-10 minutes in the relaxing scene.
- Have the Veteran "leave" the location through the same "entryway".

TALKING TIPS: *Guided Imagery*

Before we begin talking about pleasant activities that we can incorporate into your life, I want you to think about a pleasant location. This can be a positive memory or an ideal place that creates a relaxed feeling. Consider how the place looks, feels, and smells. Close your eyes and put yourself there.

Imagine yourself walking slowly down a path toward your relaxing place. The path is comforting and peaceful. As you walk down this path, imagine that all of your stresses, worries, and tension are leaving you. Enjoy this journey to your relaxing place.

Reach out and touch something in this place... Notice its texture and how it feels against your skin. Notice the different objects around you...their shapes, textures, and colors. Notice the light and shade of this place and how the light reflects off of these objects...

Exploring Pleasant Activities

As previously discussed, living with chronic pain can affect Veterans' lives in various ways. One of the most significant has likely been decreased involvement in pleasant activities. Many with pain may have stopped participating in hobbies, spending time with others, or engaging in physical activities. They may feel that they physically cannot do the things they want, are "no fun" to be with because of pain, or are worried about experiencing a pain flare-up that might interfere with plans. Regardless of the reason, a lack of pleasant activities decreases quality of life and often increases negative mood. The goal of this session is to explore things that patients enjoy and determine ways to regularly incorporate these activities.

Identifying pleasurable activities for those with chronic pain may be challenging for several reasons. Pain-related negative mood such as depression and irritability may lessen the ability to identify such activities or lessen the motivation to engage in them. Psychosocial challenges such as limited resources may be a barrier. Chronic pain and poor sleep may leave patients feeling too tired or fatigued to participate in activities. Primarily, however, Veterans may mention things that they would like to do but "can't" because of pain limitations. Particularly among those who have been in the military, they may perceive themselves as athletes and feel they can no longer participate in sports and other physical activities as they once did. While this may be true, explaining the benefits of engaging in pleasant activities and exploring creative and adaptive ways to participate despite pain is the goal of this session.

Potential benefits of engaging in pleasant activities:

Positive distraction from pain

Improved mood and self-esteem

Increased socialization

Enhanced attention and concentration skills

Enhanced sense of purpose and direction

Use the Pleasant Activities List, to explore options. Begin by asking Veterans about activities they used to enjoy doing, engage in to a limited but not ideal degree currently, or have always wanted to try. This discussion will likely generate a forum for examining alternative ways to engage in previously enjoyed hobbies. Veterans, especially those prone to black and white thinking, may not have considered more creative solutions for how to be involved in pleasurable activities. For example, if Veterans report that they used to enjoy bowling but are now unable to, inquire about their willingness to teach bowling to children or adolescents. Remind Veterans that coaching is a path to share knowledge and experience regardless of pain, as many are unable to play sports

in the same capacity as they age. In addition, Veterans may like the idea of being able to “give back” and help young people. If Veterans are uninterested in coaching, suggest the option of using a gaming system. Many on the market (e.g., Nintendo Wii) have bowling and other games that involve a limited amount of physical activity with a realistic experience of the sport.

In addition, many VA facilities have a recreation therapy (RT) department. If RT is available, they may be able to offer a wealth of resources for pleasant activity development. For example, instruction in areas such as wood and leatherwork, painting, or assembling models may be available, and craft kits often are available for home use. In addition, some VAs offer consultation for adaptive sporting options such as golfing, kayaking, or horseback riding. This service provides a personal evaluation and allows Veterans’ input on how they may modify their body mechanics when playing a sport, or how to use adaptive equipment. Finally, speaking with someone in RT or the Vocational Therapy department at VA about potential volunteer opportunities may be recommended. Many Veterans with chronic pain are not currently employed and feel a lack of purpose in their lives. Discussing volunteer options related to their interests such as being a Big Brother or Big Sister, helping with books at the local library, or volunteering at VA in service to their fellow Veterans may be appealing. Such activities not only help provide structure to the week, but patients often find them rewarding.

Since it may have been a while since the Veteran engaged in something for pleasure, the Pleasant Activities List may help generate areas for exploration.

The following is an example of an exchange between Sheila and her therapist regarding identifying pleasant activities:

Sheila: I know that I should do more fun stuff with Tim, but it seems like I’m always either in too much pain or just too tired.

Therapist: I noticed that you said you “should” do more. Do you want to do more?

Sheila: I don’t know. I think I said “should” because it’s really affecting my relationship. We used to go out with friends all the time. I used to be a fun person. Now Tim says I’m using pain as an “excuse” not to go out.

Therapist: Tell me more about using pain as an “excuse.”

Sheila: Well, sometimes we’ll have plans and I cancel because I’m just not feeling well. Tim gets upset and says, “You *never* feel well!” I know he’s sick of me being sick.

Therapist: What do you mean by that?

Sheila: He used to stay home with me but now he goes out without me. Whenever I tell him I can’t do something because I’m in a lot of pain, he just gets angry and leaves.

Therapist: What do you do?

Sheila: Stay home by myself. I watch TV then go to bed. I usually end up feeling even more down and am asleep before he gets home.

Therapist: You mentioned “fun stuff” – what is an example of something that you would like to do?

Sheila: Honestly, I don’t know what I can do that won’t cause an increase in pain or wear me out so that I can’t work the next day.

Therapist: I hear you saying that you are concerned that your relationship is being affected because you’re not “fun” like you used to be, but at the same time you’re not sure how to have fun anymore or even if you can. Is that right?

Sheila: Exactly.

Therapist: To get you going, here is a list of activities that some people enjoy. For homework, look over this list. Choose at least three activities that are either already on the list or that you add to the list. We will discuss them next time we meet and come up with a plan for how to incorporate them into your life.

Practice

Before the next session, Veterans should continue to contemplate pleasant activities to incorporate into their lives. For practice, ask them to identify at least three activities using the assistance of the Pleasant Activities List. Although the next session will focus on implementation of activities, suggest that they try to engage in at least one of their chosen activities before the next meeting. This will facilitate a discussion about potential obstacles.

Session 7: Pleasant Activities 2

Session 6 focused on identifying pleasurable activities. During Session 7, Veterans will solidify the activities that they wish to pursue and develop a concrete plan for implementation. In all activity scheduling, pacing should be used to maintain a balanced approach.

Session 7 Agenda

✓	Veteran completes assessment measures.
✓	Establish agenda.
✓	Review Session 6.
✓	Present Session 7 content: Establishing and scheduling pleasant activities.
✓	Discuss home practice.

Session 7 Materials

- All assessment measures except WAI-SR
- Pleasant Activities List
- Pleasant Activities Schedule

Pleasant Activity Implementation

Review the home practice and discuss any engagement in pleasant activities since the last session. If Veterans are still uncertain about activities that they would like to adopt, more time should be spent discussing the list of possibilities and any other considerations. Activities such as excessive television watching or computer activities are discouraged due to their passive or often solitary nature.

Once two to three activities have been identified, scheduling these activities into each week will increase the likelihood that Veterans will follow through with implementation. Remind patients of the benefits of increasing pleasurable activities such as improved mood and increased socialization, as well as a healthy distraction from pain. It is important that the activities chosen as well as the schedule devised is feasible for Veterans to achieve. Creating an unrealistic plan only sets the stage for lack of completion and the accompanying negative emotions. In addition, the use of pacing during chosen activities is critical. Remind Veterans to use pacing and discuss in detail how it may be applied to their chosen activities.

Use the Pleasant Activities Schedule to plan how the selected activities will be implemented over the next week. Have Veterans add their choices in the *Activity* column. While playing basketball would require pacing, playing cards may not. Encourage Veterans to start with easily achievable activities in order to develop a sense of mastery, and move to more difficult tasks after some proficiency has been established. Veterans may feel motivated to expand the schedule of activities after initial successes have boosted mood and self-esteem. It may be helpful to provide a reminder that when adopting a new activity, the enjoyment may increase over time like with the guitar example from last session.

Discuss the details of the plan and be as specific as possible. Review not only the day or days of the week that will be best for the activity, but the time of day, location, frequency, and other relevant information. Being specific will help Veterans visualize enacting the plan, which has several benefits. First, it will bring attention to barriers that may be encountered and these can be addressed in session. For example, if a Veteran wants to play basketball, what if it is raining and the outdoor court is not an option? Is there an indoor court that might be accessible? It is helpful to process such real life circumstances with Veterans. Second, reviewing the specific details will encourage adherence to the plan. If Veterans have a clear picture when they leave session of what they will do and what to expect, they are more likely to implement activities as discussed.

Scheduling activities helps improve daily functioning, so encourage patients to have something planned each day, balancing physical activity with leisure and recreational activity.

- Therapist: From our discussions, you said that lately you spend most of your time sitting in the recliner. However, it appears that you have a lot of interests, like listening to music, going fishing, spending time with your grandchildren, attending church functions. What is it that makes you most happy?
- Reggie: My biggest love was playing basketball. But I can't do that anymore.
- Therapist: In the context of basketball, let's talk about what you CAN do. Many people do not play basketball, but participate in other ways. Which ways can you think of?
- Reggie: I do watch it on TV. Also, my granddaughter is on her school's basketball team. I used to watch her play, but haven't been to a game this year.
- Therapist: Have you helped her practice?
- Reggie: Not in a while. I'm sure there are still some moves I can teach her, though.
- Therapist: What are some of the reasons that you haven't gone to your granddaughter's games or "coached" her at the house?
- Reggie: I just haven't been leaving the house much lately.
- Therapist: What are your thoughts about creating a plan for engaging in these activities?
- Reggie: I can go to her games, she has one this weekend. My family also gets together for dinner after church on Sundays. I plan to start going to services again this weekend, I already told my wife and she told my kids so everyone's expecting me. The grandkids usually play ball afterward. I can go outside with them then. I would like to spend more time with the grandkids anyway.
- Therapist: That's a great plan. Remember, too, that you can always meet with the Recreation Therapist here at the VA about possibilities for adaptive sports.

Anticipating Obstacles

Discuss anticipated barriers to Veterans' participation in scheduled activities and collaboratively brainstorm possible solutions or backup plans. Below are some frequently cited barriers and strategies for addressing them in session. These issues may arise during Session 6 while reviewing activity options or in Session 7 when discussing how Veterans will implement activities into their lives.

"With all this pain, I can't think about anything else that could be important."

Reinforce that a primary goal of this treatment is to help create a life worth living despite the presence of pain. Remind Veterans that having a positive distraction can help take their minds off of pain, even if temporarily.

"I have too many other things going on to try and schedule things for pleasure."

More structured planning can actually improve time management skills and create opportunities for this additional activity. Discuss the importance of having pleasant activities to improve wellbeing and increase effectiveness in other areas. Stress the role of balance in overall health.

"There's no way I can do any activity no matter how much I pace myself."

Remind Veterans of progress they have already made with other physical activities such as walking. Encourage behavioral trials to test negative expectations and start with activities that are comfortable. Reinforce incremental achievements along the way.

“I will think about hobbies when my pain improves.”

Stress the importance of not allowing pain to dictate what Veterans do and do not do. Remind them of the biopsychosocial model, and the influence of activity and mood on pain experience.

“I can’t find the motivation to do this. It’s hard enough just getting up every day.”

Review the benefits of engaging in pleasant activities on both mood and pain. Tell Veterans that pushing themselves to engage in the behavior, even when they don’t feel like it, will improve their mood and overall motivation to try again.

Practice

Ask Veterans to complete the Pleasant Activities Schedule. Once their plan is complete, request that they track their progress and note, not only when they participated in the scheduled activity but, when they did not and why. Remind patients that multiple attempts are common and provide reassurance that through collaboration with the therapist they will find an activity schedule that is realistic and enhances their lives.