

Kit Four Priorities



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American Chronic Pain Association

Step Three

Priorities

Did you ever find yourself in the situation where you have ten different things that need your immediate attention? You become so overwhelmed, the thought of it all makes you feel tired and confused. Instead of working to complete at least one of your tasks, you choose to do nothing.



A feeling of being overwhelmed is usually a part of chronic pain. There are so many issues to deal with, so much that needs to be done and no energy to do it. The mere thought of the situation creates more pain. Without knowing where to begin or what is important, there is a strong chance that little or nothing will get done.

While avoiding the tasks that need attention, you notice a growing sense of uselessness and failure. Since your pain began you are aware of more days when life seems uncontrollable than days when you actually feel productive. The non-productive days add to your sense of having nothing left to contribute to the well being of your family, your friends, or even to yourself. There appears to be nothing you can do to regain control.

But, there is! Priorities are the tools one needs to begin actions. Before you can make any plans, long-term or short-term, you must know what is important to you. Begin by asking what is the most important thing in your life? Take a moment to write down what is important to you at this very moment.



When life throws so many obstacles at you, it may feel like you're drowning. What you need is a starting point, a place to begin. In order to sort out your life, begin by making a list of all the short term responsibilities and tasks that demand your attention. Be sure to include everything you would do if you were able. It might be helpful to focus on this exercise for a few days, or even a week.

[illegible]

Use the tear-out sheet on the next page, small index cards, or a scratch pad to record what activities demand your attention. (If you choose to use the tear-out, you should make extra copies of it before you begin.)

Don't worry about your ability to take action right now – this exercise is for identifying short term issues you are faced with. Try to find a comfortable, secluded spot where you will not be interrupted such as a park, an easy chair, or your secret hide-away.



Now, from this list select the ten items with the highest importance to you. The key words are *important to you*, not anyone else. Take your time, as you are creating a plan of action for the next several weeks. This exercise can provide you with a starting point, so give it serious thought.

How to identify your priorities

- Each activity during the day is rated on a one-to-ten scale. Then in a few words, note why the activity is or is not important. It may require several days to get a real sense of what you do from day to day.
- Review the major projects that must be done, then list them in order of importance and expected completion date.
- Walk through your home and see what needs to be done, then rank each activity by importance.
- Make an effort to contact friends and family. Determine if they are an important part of your life and should be given a priority.
- What type of relaxation and recreational activities do you enjoy? Don't forget to include them as a priority.

Once this task is complete, cut along the dotted lines so that each card contains one item that needs your attention.

Previously we asked to list everything that is important to you. Go to that page now and review what you wrote. If you have not already torn the page out and cut the cards, please do so now. Now, lay the cards out on the table before you. Take a few minutes to review the importance to you of each item. Then arrange the cards in order of importance. Congratulations, you have now identified your priorities! You have a place to begin in the palm of your hand.

Each morning review your priorities and rearrange your card if your priorities change. Learning to be flexible may make life a little less stressful.



Long Term Priorities

Now that you have identified your short term interests, it is time to look at your long range priorities. Begin by completing the following statements:

a) The most important thing in my life --

b) I could do anything I wanted, I would--

c) The most important thing to me when I was 18 was --

d) When I was 18 my plans for the rest of your were --

Remember how important it was to know what you were “going to be” for the rest of your life? Planning your life was important. It gave you direction and a reason to work hard. Knowing that you were investing in your future made the work seem easier, and you believed there would be a pay-off for your efforts. Perhaps your anticipated reward was money, a diploma, advancement, or simply knowing that you accomplished what you set out to do. Perhaps the most important knowledge was that you were in control. Maintaining control of a situation, life or the moment is important to most of us. Today, however, pain often is in control of your life. Without a sense control it's quite easy to surrender to a life of pain and despair. When that happens the future seems very bleak and you may be without hope of a better tomorrow.

You may ask yourself, “How does knowing what's important relate to how well I deal with my pain?” Well, without a sense of direction or feeling that you are able to accomplish much, it is difficult to get excited about anything.



Take charge of your life! . . . To act intelligently and effectively, we still must have a plan. To the proverb which says, “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step,” I would add the words “and a road map.” ~ Cecile M. Springer

Priority, n. 1. precedence, especially established by order of importance or urgency. 2.(a) an established right to precedence, (b) an authoritative rating that established such precedence ¹

A plan of action based on personal priorities provide a sense of order in life. The question is do you have long-range priorities? Do you know how to identify your long-range priorities? We have talked short term priorities that you a sense of control over today. Now it's time to look at the big picture,-- your future. First, let's look at some matters that require consideration when setting long-range priorities.

¹ Morris, William, Editor, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, MA, 1981.

What do you want? List activities that you have always wanted to do, or planned to get around to some day, but have not been accomplished.

- What is the first thing that comes to mind when you ask yourself, "I always wanted . . ."
- Consider everything that is important in your life no matter how difficult or how simple it might be.
- What dreams did you have before your pain that still interest you?
- Ask yourself if you accomplished what you wanted when you were going to school?
- Are there people in your life that you would like to reconnect with?
- Are there places you planned to visit, but never got around to?
- Aside from being pain free and winning the lottery what would make you happy?
- What are your basic needs? What do you need to have some control over your life?
- What do you most strive for in your life – accomplishment, security, love, power, excitement, knowledge, or something else? ²

On the next page, finish the statement, "What I want most in the world is . . . Use the questions above to help you organize your thoughts.



²Stock, Gregory, Ph.D., The Book of Questions, Workman Publishing, New York, NY 1987.

“What I want most in the world is . . .

Having a pain experience has made me more aware of what I can do instead of focusing on my limitations. When I reached out and began to educate myself on issues of pain, I was able to come to terms with my own pain. I have learned that by pacing myself I am able to do the things that are necessary and find the energy to do some of the things I want to do. It is okay to say no and not feel guilty. The ability to do one task at a time and accept the inability to complete everything at once did not bring the disaster I thought would come. The world still revolves and tomorrow comes on time.

Geneva Cottrill, Chillicothe, OH Leader

Some things to think about

- Like everything else in life, priorities change from time to time. Just as you change so do your needs and talents change.
- Don't judge yourself harshly if you did not stick to your priorities. You have the right to do less than humanly possible.
- Have one of your priorities involve another person for at least one activity each day. Remember isolation is a big problem with chronic pain. It is important that you maintain contact with others.
- Reviewing your priorities every morning will allow you to identify what needs to be accomplished each day. Revisit the assets and abilities you identified in Section III, *Getting Involved*.

Getting started; – A plan of action:

Before you determine a plan of action it would be helpful to keep a daily journal for a week or two.. Each day, around the same time, write down projects that you might like to complete during the next month. Use the questions above for guidance.



To obtain additional information on keeping a personal journal you can refer to the American Chronic Pain Association's, *Staying Well, Advanced Pain Management Workbook*, available through the National Office of the ACPA. Personal journals, when kept for a long period of time, can reveal things about you that you may not have been aware of. You may also want to use the ACPA, *Reflections of You*, a daily meditation book and personal journal to guide you to new discoveries about your wants and needs.

Reevaluate priorities every day. Accept the reality of your situation and work with what you have. It is part of your job to investigate every aspect of your condition. Make that one of your priorities. D. Bunnell, Orange, CA

A good way to test your ability to achieve your long-range priorities is to try to establish and carry out a plan for the next four weeks.

The following page is a calendar designed to allow tracking of your priorities-oriented activities for the next four weeks. It will give you the opportunity to follow through with plans you've established. When developing these plans remember to focus on your abilities, not your disabilities, in shaping your future.



**Just remember—when you think all is lost,
the future remains.**

Quoted by Bob Goddard

My long range priorities are:

- Each day I need to work on making my priority important to me.
- Every morning I will place a check in the square representing the current day. ✓
- Every evening I will place a star in the appropriate day if I have kept my priority in mind. ☆
- Each day I do not remind myself that I have priorities, I will an X in that day.

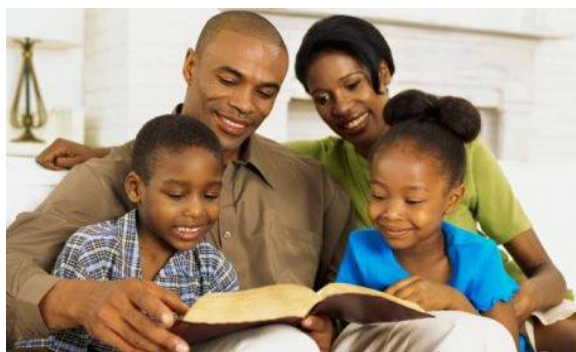
Weekly Priority Card	
Monday:	_____
Tuesday:	_____
Wednesday:	_____
Thursday:	_____
Friday:	_____
Saturday:	_____
Sunday:	_____

Feel free to make additional copies to track your priorities for the next four weeks.

At the end of each week, review your diary/calendar. Were you aware of your priorities each day and did you do anything to advance your goal? Or, if you missed a day here and there, make a commitment to do better next week. After all, you are putting out this effort to help yourself!

To Review:

You are learning the importance of defining your priorities. Whether or not one has chronic pain, everyone needs to understand what is important to him or her and then to ensure that those needs and desires are not ignored. How can you expect others to respect your wishes, wants and needs, if you don't make them a high priority?



Recognizing your priorities

- ❖ Ask yourself what is the most important thing in your life.
- ❖ Make a list of the important issues in your life, no matter how unusual they might be.
- ❖ Be flexible. Remember that your priorities will change and you must be willing to change as well.
- ❖ You need to develop both short-term and long-term priorities.
- ❖ When identifying long-range priorities take time to consider your dreams, hopes and plans from the past, and include them if appropriate.
- ❖ Use your priority diary/calendar as a daily activity guide.
- ❖ It is important to develop a plan of action as it is to determine the priority of your goals.