

Building Confidence in Movement

Overcoming Fear of Movement During Rehabilitation

1 Why Movement Confidence Matters

Fear of movement — known clinically as kinesiophobia — is one of the most common and underrecognised barriers to recovery. It affects a large proportion of people living with musculoskeletal pain, often without them realising it.

When pain makes movement feel dangerous, the natural response is to avoid it. But avoidance leads to deconditioning — muscles weaken, joints stiffen, and the body becomes less equipped to cope with everyday demands. Over time, this makes recovery harder and pain worse, not better.

Pain during movement does not always mean damage is occurring. Learning to distinguish between uncomfortable-but-safe movement and genuinely harmful movement is a core part of rehabilitation — and your clinician is here to guide you through that process.

2 The Fear-Avoidance Cycle

Stage	What Happens
Pain occurs during movement	The brain registers movement as a threat and activates a protective response — this is normal, but can become overactive with persistent pain.
Movement is avoided	Short-term relief is felt, but tissues gradually weaken and stiffen without the stimulus of regular movement.
Deconditioning sets in	Reduced capacity for movement lowers the threshold at which pain is triggered — even small efforts begin to hurt.
Fear increases	Even gentle movement feels threatening, reinforcing avoidance — and the cycle deepens.

Breaking this cycle requires gradual, supported re-exposure to movement — not willpower alone. The good news is that with the right guidance, the nervous system can learn that movement is safe again.

3 Graded Exposure — The Evidence-Based Approach

Graded exposure involves systematically introducing feared movements at a manageable level, then gradually increasing the challenge over time. This approach teaches the nervous system that movement is safe — building confidence through repeated, positive experience.

Principle	What It Means in Practice
Start below your fear threshold	Begin with movements that feel uncomfortable but not frightening — even very small ranges of motion count as a meaningful start.
Increase gradually	Small, consistent progressions build tolerance without triggering the fear response. There is no prize for rushing.
Separate pain from danger	Discomfort is expected and does not mean damage is occurring. Your clinician will guide what is safe for you specifically.
Celebrate every step	Each completed movement is evidence that you are capable. Build on it — progress is cumulative.

4 Practical Strategies to Build Confidence

Strategy	How It Helps	Starting Point
Visualisation	Mental rehearsal of movement reduces fear before physical practice by activating similar neural pathways.	Spend 2 minutes visualising the exercise clearly before doing it.
Distraction during exercise	Reduces focus on pain and fear anticipation, making movement feel more manageable.	Music, podcasts, or conversation during your sessions.
Movement journaling	Tracks progress and builds a personal record of evidence that you are improving.	Note what you did, how it felt, and any improvements — however small.
Talking to your clinician	Reassurance from an expert reduces catastrophising and provides accurate information about what is safe.	Write down your movement fears and discuss them at your next appointment.

5 Key Takeaways

KEY TAKEAWAY 1

Fear of movement is common — and it is something you can change. Kinesiophobia is a recognised part of many pain experiences, not a sign of weakness. Understanding why your brain raises the alarm during movement is the first step to gently turning the volume down. You are not broken — your nervous system is being protective.

KEY TAKEAWAY 2

Small, consistent steps build more confidence than big leaps. Graded exposure works because repetition teaches the nervous system that movement is safe. Every session — even a modest one — is a vote of confidence in your body's ability to cope. There is no finish line you need to race to; steady progress is powerful progress.

KEY TAKEAWAY 3

You do not have to do this alone. Your rehabilitation team is here to help you find movements that feel manageable, interpret what your body is telling you, and celebrate your wins along the way. If a movement feels too frightening, say so — there is always another way in.