



Moving Within Your Limits

Exercise, Safety & Limit Setting with GVHD

Social work lens: safety, self-advocacy, creative problem-solving, and meaningful goals.

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Safe. Creative. Empowering. Every step counts.



Dana-Farber
Cancer Institute

Why Movement Still Matters

The goal is not “exercise harder.” The goal is to preserve function, energy, confidence, and quality of life.



Strength & function

Maintain or rebuild muscle, mobility, and everyday function.



Energy & fatigue

Regular activity, balanced with rest, can support energy and reduce fatigue.



Sleep & mood

Movement can support sleep, stress management, mood, and confidence.



Healthy living

Exercise is one part of a broader survivorship and wellness plan.



Rest is part of training

Dana-Farber emphasizes activity interspersed with periods of rest.

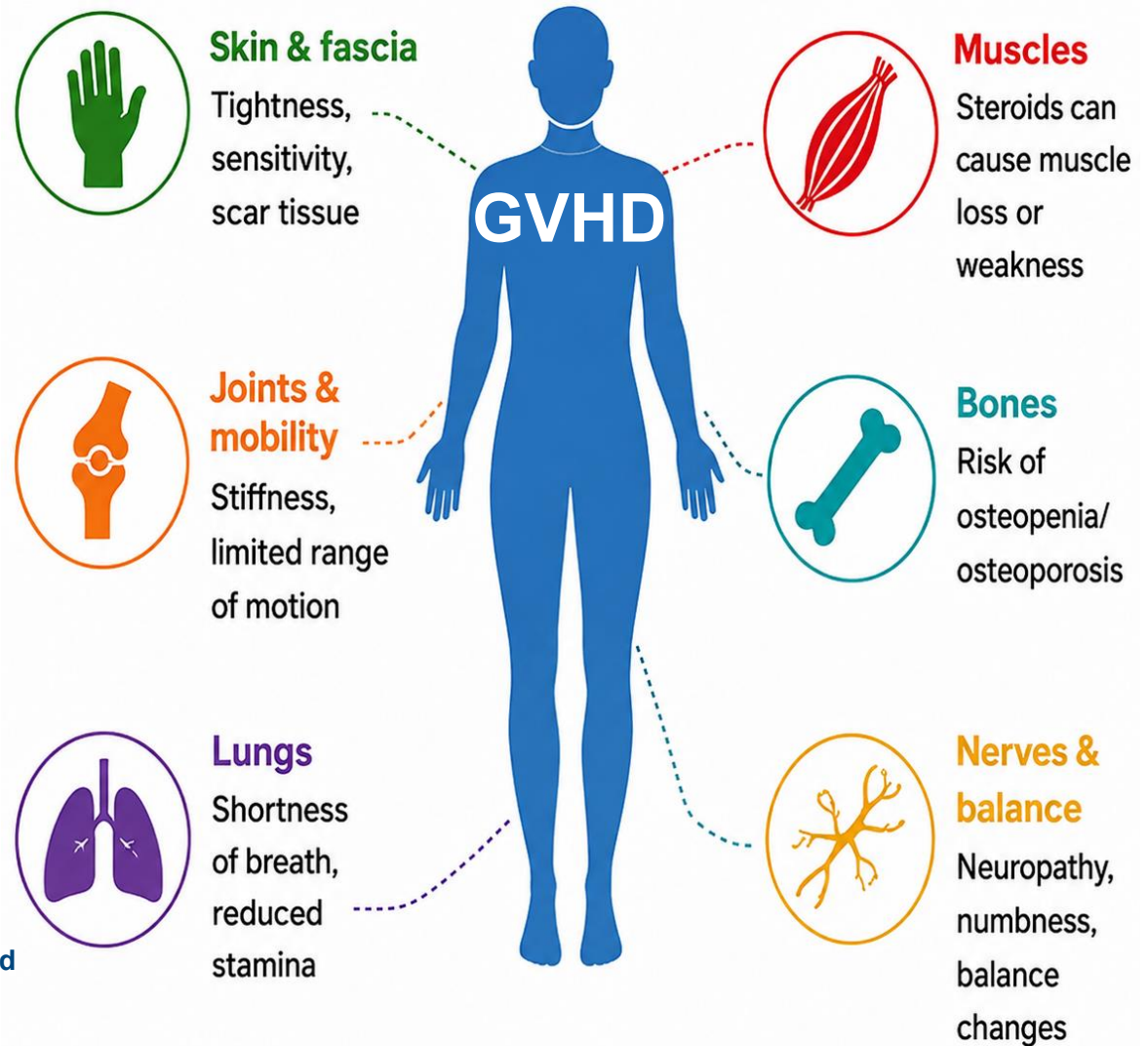
Today's question:

“What is a safe win for me today?”

GVHD

Considerations: Know Your Body

GVHD can affect multiple body systems; symptoms and treatment effects can change what movement feels safe or useful.



The right movement plan is individualized — and may change.

Work with your care team to create a plan that is safe, realistic, and right for you.

Where and how to start?

GVHD and Exercising

Every journey starts with a starting point.

Meet yourself where you are.

GVHD can affect your energy, strength, mobility, and daily function. Everyone's experience is different, and there is no one-size-fits-all exercise plan.



With the right support, you can:



Check in with your care team

They can help you determine what is safe and recommended based on your symptoms, treatment, and current status.



Find what works for you

Your movement plan may include adaptations, supports, and realistic goals.



Focus on what matters

It's not about athletic performance — it's about building strength, energy, confidence, and quality of life.



Take the next step

Start where you are. Small steps add up to meaningful progress.

*Safe. Creative. Empowering.
Every step counts.*

Safety First: Know Your Zone

Use a Green–Yellow–Red framework to guide your day and your workouts.



GREEN — GO

Feeling well
Usual symptoms under control
Good energy / mood

Do your planned activity.



YELLOW — MODIFY

Some fatigue or discomfort
Symptoms feel different or worse
Stressful day

**Reduce intensity, time, or type.
Take more rest.**



RED — STOP

New or worsening symptoms
Fever, infection, flare
Dizziness, chest pain, shortness of
breath

**Pause and contact your care
team.**

**There is no award for pushing through pain. Safety is part of the goal.
TALK TO YOUR CARE TEAM FOR GUIDANCE**

Build Your Movement Menu

There is no one “right” exercise. Choose what fits your body, symptoms, preferences, and day. Along with talking to your medical team

Strength training

Maintain muscle & bone health



Low-impact cardio

Walking, cycling, elliptical, dance



Yoga / Yogalates

Flexibility, balance, body awareness



Tai Chi / Qigong

Gentle movement & breath



Core strengthening

Support posture & stability



Stretching & mobility

Reduce stiffness; improve range of motion

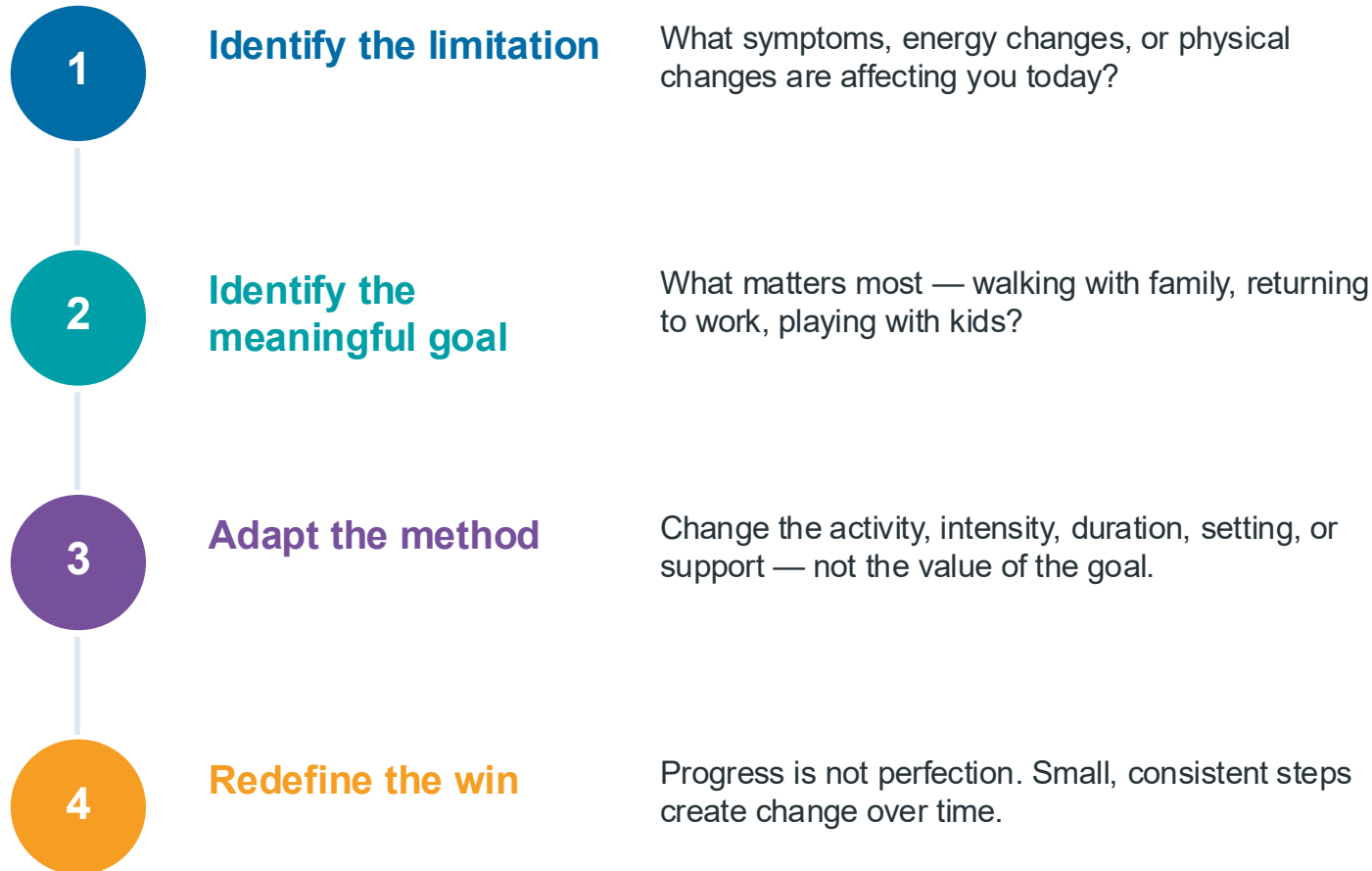


Dana-Farber's Zakim Center offers these modalities in person, online, and on demand, with options based on experience level.

Start slow. Use what you have. Do what you can. Reassess often.

Limit Setting: A 4-Step Framework

Limit setting is not about doing less — it is about doing what matters, safely.



Try it: “My goal is ____; today my safe version of that goal is ____.”

“Exercise Snacks”: movement without the all-or-nothing mindset

A “snack” is a brief bout of movement that can be repeated or spread across the day — useful when stamina, time, or symptoms fluctuate.

2–10

MINUTES

Think:
“Can I add a little
movement here?”

Not:
“Do I have enough
energy for a full
workout?”

MORNING

2 minutes of gentle mobility

BETWEEN TASKS

5 minutes of walking or seated movement

WITH FAMILY

One song of movement together

LOW-ENERGY DAY

One safe, meaningful movement — then rest

**Social work lens: lower the activation energy.
Make movement easier to start, repeat, and adapt.**

Education only: short bouts can help build activity into daily life; individualize activity with the treating team.



Motivation: Make the Goal Small Enough to Start

Motivation often grows after we experience success — not before.

Instead of asking: “How do I make myself do more?”

Ask: “What is small enough that I can actually do today?”

01

CONNECT TO A WHY

What would movement help me do?
Walk with my partner • play with family •
feel more capable

02

CHOOSE THE MINIMUM

What is the smallest version that still counts?
5 minutes • one lap • 3 stretches • one song

03

MAKE IT EASY TO START

When + where + what support?
Attach it to a routine • set it out • ask for help

04

COUNT THE WIN

What did I learn — not just how much did I do?
Consistency • confidence • function • listening
to my body

SOCIAL WORK LENS Reduce shame. Increase choice. Build a plan that can survive real life.



Evidence-informed: ASCO Educational Book — goal setting, self-monitoring & social support; NCI cancer fatigue guidance.

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Small enough to start. Meaningful enough to matter.

Motivation is easier to sustain when the goal is specific, attainable, connected to values, and visible.

WHY

What do I want movement to help me do?
Play with my kids • walk with my partner • feel more capable

MINIMUM

What is my “smallest version” on a hard day?
5 minutes • one lap • 3 stretches • one song

PLAN

When + where + with whom?
Attach movement to an existing routine.

TRACK

What counts as progress?
Notice consistency, function, confidence — not perfection.

START SMALL → EXPERIENCE SUCCESS → BUILD CONFIDENCE → CHOOSE THE NEXT STEP

Mindfulness can be part of the workout

A therapeutic skill: notice → adjust → continue, without judging the body.

“What do I notice right now?”

Before movement:

- Check breath
- Notice tension / fatigue
- Choose an intention

During movement:

- Notice effort, breath, and emotion
- Adjust without self-criticism

**Mindfulness ≠ pushing through.
It is information.**

01

ARRIVE

30–60 seconds

Feet supported.
One slow breath.
Name what you notice.

02

MOVE WITH A CUE

Throughout the activity

“Can I soften my shoulders?”
“Can I breathe comfortably?”
“Do I need to modify?”

03

CLOSE + REFLECT

30 seconds

What helped?
What felt sustainable?
What should I change next time?

Social work lens: build awareness, choice, and self-compassion.

Reframe the barrier — then design the accommodation

Motivation often improves when the problem is treated as a design challenge, not a character flaw.

BARRIER



REFRAME



ACCOMMODATION

“I’m too tired.”

What is the smallest useful dose?

5 minutes • seated movement • split across the day

“I can’t get to the gym.”

How can we change the setting?

Hallway • home • virtual class • community space

“My body feels unpredictable.”

Can the plan be flexible?

Green/yellow/red options • backup activity • rest built in

“I keep falling off.”

What is making the plan hard to repeat?

Pair movement with routine • buddy • reminder • simpler goal

Social work question: “What can we change around the person so movement becomes more possible?”

Evidence-informed: ASCO Educational Book on exercise motivation; CDC cancer survivor physical activity guidance.

Be Creative: Turn Barriers into Options

A social work lens asks: What is getting in the way, and what support or workaround could make the goal possible?

Fatigue

5–10 minute “movement snacks”

Pain / stiffness

Gentle range of motion; PT/OT input

Transportation

Virtual or on-demand classes

Cost

Ask about financial resources and free options

Fear of injury

Exercise consult / supervised plan

Time

Schedule small, repeatable movement moments

If the first plan does not fit, that is information — not failure.

Resources & Support

Dana-Farber programs + a patient-friendly book to support safe, sustainable movement.

Zakim Center for Integrative Therapies & Healthy Living

Exercise classes & consults
Healthy Living Program
Integrative Medicine Consultations
Acupuncture • Massage Therapy
Expressive Arts Therapy
Meditation & Mindfulness
Pediatric offerings • Program
calendar

Exercise Classes & Consults

[Dana-Farber resource page](#)

Exercise consult: 617-632-3322



LIVESTRONG Program at the YMCA

A free 12-week physical activity and well-being program designed for adult cancer survivors.

Program Highlights

- Individualized exercise plans
- Builds strength, endurance, and confidence
- Supportive group environment
- Led by trained YMCA instructors
- Focus on overall quality of life

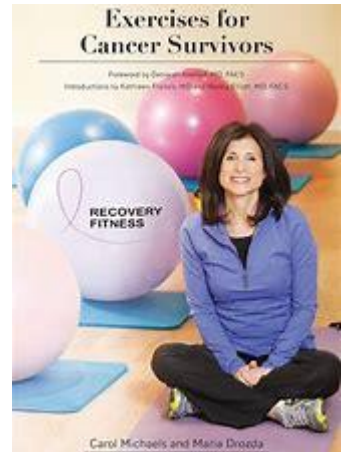


Who Can Participate?

Adult cancer survivors who have completed treatment or are under medical supervision and ready to increase physical activity.

Ask your local YMCA for dates and enrollment information.

- Schwartz combines her experience as an oncology nurse, cancer survivor, and exercise researcher to provide a step-by-step approach to exercise during and after cancer treatment. The book specifically addresses fatigue, recovery, physical and emotional health, and safely starting an exercise program.



- Practical, exercise-focused resource for cancer survivors.
- Includes exercises designed around different needs during recovery.
- A hospital cancer-resource guide specifically lists it among recommended books on physical activity for people with cancer.

- Focuses on using exercise as part of cancer recovery.
- Good fit for patients who want a **practical starting point** rather than a textbook.
- Also included in a hospital cancer-resource guide's recommended reading list.



Evidence & Inspiration

The evidence supports rehabilitation and exercise — while also reminding us that GVHD is complex and individualized.

2026 • Pérez-Aguilar et al. — systematic review/meta-analysis

13 RCTs (~657 allo-HSCT recipients): rehabilitation appeared safe/feasible in studied settings; adherence ~76%; adverse events were low and mostly mild.

[PubMed](#)

2026 • Role of physical therapy across allo-HSCT trajectory

10 RCTs (537 participants): rehabilitation was generally feasible/safe; benefits varied by phase and adherence; evidence certainty was often low.

[PubMed](#)

2025 • Ye et al. — umbrella review of exercise in HSCT

Exercise was associated with better quality of life and less fatigue, but the underlying evidence quality ranged from moderate to critically low.

[PubMed](#)

2015/2017 • Smith et al. — GVHD rehabilitation reviews

GVHD can create musculoskeletal, neurologic, cardiopulmonary, skin/fascial, bone, and functional limitations; multidisciplinary rehabilitation can address these sequelae.

[PubMed](#)

Bottom line: evidence is encouraging, but the safest plan is matched to the person, symptoms, treatment phase, and care team guidance.



**Move with purpose.
Listen to your body.
Achieve your goals.**

Your goal can stay the same even when the route changes.

Safety • Flexibility • Support • Small steps

Dana-Farber Zakim Center Exercise Consults: 617-632-3322



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