4 Steps To Fixing Joint Pain and Training CrossFit Pain-Free

How My Clients Eliminate Pain, Unlock Peak Performance, and Start Setting PRs in 12 weeks or less.

WPSN | Pain-Free Performance

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Joint pain is one of the most frustrating obstacles for CrossFit athletes.

It can disrupt your training, slow your progress, and leave you wondering if you'll ever feel the same way about your lifts and workouts.

But here's the good news: **You can train pain-free without sacrificing your performance.**

In this guide, I'll show you the four steps to eliminate joint pain, get back to the workouts you love, and build strength without compromising your fitness goals.

What you can expect in this guide:

- How to quickly assess your movement.
- How to determine a mobility, stability, or motor control issue.
- Strategies to address common causes of dysfunction.
- A proven 4-step process to train pain-free while building strength and fitness.

Who Am I?

Hi, I'm Dr. Will Murtagh, PT, DPT, MS, CSCS, CISSN

As a physical therapist and CrossFit coach, I specialize in helping CrossFit athletes like you train pain-free while maximizing performance.

I know how discouraging it can be when pain keeps you from doing what you love.

I've worked with many CrossFit athletes who face joint pain and injuries that threaten their training consistency.

Through years of experience, I've developed a systematic approach that not only helps athletes recover but also helps prevent future injuries.

Whether you're dealing with a nagging shoulder, knee, or back pain, I've helped countless athletes return to full training without the need to miss workouts.

My mission is to give you the tools you need to strengthen your movement, eliminate pain, and keep progressing—without interruption.

I've been where you are—struggling with joint pain that derailed my training.

But through trial, error, and working with countless CrossFit athletes, I've developed a framework that works.

I've seen my clients overcome pain, regain confidence, and keep training without losing their hard-earned progress.

I've witnessed firsthand how CrossFit athletes can reach their full potential when they've eliminated pain and built a stronger, more resilient body.

And now, I'm here to help you do the same.

Does This Sound Familiar?

- **Nagging joint pain disrupts your training.**

  Frustrating joint pain is preventing you from training effectively: Whether it's your shoulders, knees, hips, or back, that persistent discomfort is making every movement feel like a challenge.

- **You miss workouts or need to scale back intensity.**

  Just to manage the pain: You've had to adjust your training, but it feels like you're constantly compromising your fitness goals.

- **Traditional rehab isn't working.**

  Rest, ice, and basic stretches just aren't addressing your specific needs in CrossFit. These approaches aren't designed for the demands of high-intensity training.

- **The pain persists, and gains are disappearing.**

  You feel stuck as if you're not progressing, or worse, regressing every time you try to push yourself.

The issue is that traditional rehab doesn't account for the unique demands of CrossFit.

CrossFit athletes need solutions that not only address pain but also preserve and enhance performance.

Generalized treatments don't cater to the intensity or range of motion required by CrossFit movements.

You need a specialized approach that understands CrossFit's movements, load, and high-intensity environment.

Without this, you're left spinning your wheels, constantly battling pain while your fitness stagnates.

Overview of The Framework

The Four Steps to Eliminating Joint Pain

I've developed a four-step framework to eliminate joint pain without sacrificing your training progress:

1. **Assess** – Identify movement issues contributing to pain.
2. **Isolate** – Pinpoint the source of dysfunction.
3. **Stimulate** – Apply corrective exercises to fix the issue.
4. **Integrate** – Safely reincorporate the improved movement into your training.

Step 1: Assess

Before you can effectively fix your joint pain, you need to understand what's causing it.

Often, joint pain doesn't arise from a single traumatic injury, but from poor movement patterns that place excessive stress on specific joints.

The way you move during your workouts – and even outside of them – can create imbalances, inefficient muscle recruitment, and improper joint alignment that lead to pain over time.

The Movement Screen

To start, I'll guide you through a movement screen that helps identify any dysfunctional patterns in your body.

This screen includes several simple but effective tests that can pinpoint weaknesses or restrictions.

The goal here is not to diagnose pain but to identify patterns that could be contributing to your discomfort.

By understanding where your movement is breaking down, you can then target the right areas to correct the dysfunction and get back to pain-free training.

Here's a breakdown of the movements you'll perform in the screen:

1. **Scratch Test**
   This test helps assess the range of motion in your shoulders and upper back.

   It checks your ability to bring your hands together behind your back and evaluates the mobility and stability in your shoulder joints and thoracic spine.

   Watch Demo Video

2. **Squat**
   A foundational movement in CrossFit, the squat reveals a lot about your lower body mechanics.

   This test will highlight issues like ankle mobility, hip tightness, or improper knee tracking.

   Watch Demo Video

3. **Lunge**
   Lunges are a critical test for assessing single-leg stability and hip mobility.

   During the test, we check for any issues with balance, knee valgus (knees caving in), and hip instability.

   Watch Demo Video

4. **Toe Touch**
   This movement assesses hamstring flexibility and lower back mobility.

   Watch Demo Video

5. **Active Single Leg Raise (ASLR)**
   The ASLR evaluates the flexibility of your hamstrings and the strength and stability of your hips and core.

   Watch Demo Video

6. **Front Plank**
   The front plank helps assess core strength, which is essential for protecting your spine during CrossFit movements.

   Watch Demo Video

7. **Reverse Plank**
   This movement evaluates the posterior chain (glutes, hamstrings, lower back) and helps identify any imbalances that may lead to discomfort in the lower back, hips, or shoulders.

   Watch Demo Video

8. **Side Plank**
   The side plank is crucial for assessing the strength and endurance of the muscles on the lateral aspect of your core, including the obliques.

   Watch Demo Video

Why Start With An Assessment?

The goal of the movement screen is to provide an overall picture of how your body moves under stress.

If you're experiencing pain, some of your movement patterns are likely contributing to that discomfort.

By identifying any movement dysfunctions early on, we can implement corrective strategies before the pain becomes chronic or more severe.

Once we've identified the underlying issues, we'll move on to the next step: isolating the source of your dysfunction to address it directly.

Step 2: Isolate

Now that we've assessed your movement patterns, it's time to dig deeper and isolate the root cause of your joint pain.

This step is critical because it's not always obvious why a certain area hurts.

Is it a stability issue—like weak or unstable muscles around a joint—or a mobility problem—like tight muscles that restrict your movement?

In many cases, the problem might even be a motor control deficit, meaning your body isn't efficiently coordinating the muscles needed to stabilize or move through a particular range of motion.

The Joint-by-Joint Approach

To help isolate the problem, I follow the joint-by-joint approach.

This model suggests that the body functions optimally when alternating joints have mobility (the ability to move freely through a range of motion) and stability (the ability to control and stabilize that range).

Each joint in your body serves a specific role in your movement, and when one joint fails to perform its intended function, it places undue stress on neighboring joints, leading to pain or injury.

Here's a quick breakdown:

- **Mobility joints:** These include the ankle, thoracic spine (upper back), and shoulder.

  These joints should have the flexibility and range of motion needed for functional movement.

  When they're tight or restricted, the stress gets transferred to other areas of the body.

- **Stability joints:** These include the knee, lumbar spine (lower back), and pelvis.

  These joints are responsible for controlling and stabilizing the forces generated during movement.

  When they lack stability or strength, nearby mobility joints take on more load, leading to pain and dysfunction.

Mobility vs Stability vs Motor Control

The next question is:

Is your pain caused by a mobility issue, stability problem, or motor control deficit?

Let's break these down:

Mobility Issues

If your joints lack the ability to move through their full range, it leads to stiffness and restricted motion.

Tight muscles and fascia around a joint can cause pain because they limit how well the joint moves.

For example, if your hips are tight, they may restrict your squat depth, forcing your knees or back to compensate and leading to pain.

Stability Issues

Stability refers to your muscles' ability to control movement and maintain proper joint alignment during exercise.

A lack of stability in key muscles can cause a joint to become unstable, leading to injury.

For example, weak stabilizers in the shoulders or hips can result in poor positioning during lifts, leading to strain and joint pain.

Motor Control Deficits

This is when your brain fails to properly activate or coordinate the muscles needed for efficient movement.

Even with mobility and strength, if your nervous system isn't firing the right muscles at the right time, you won't properly stabilize during complex movements, leading to pain or injury.

Pinpointing the Issue

To address the issue, we target the joint or muscle causing dysfunction in the next phase, **stimulate**.

For stiff ankles limiting squat depth, we focus on ankle mobility.

If shoulders lack stability during overhead presses, we build stability and strength.

Identifying whether pain stems from mobility, stability, or motor control deficits allows for precise corrective work, avoiding wasted effort on symptoms alone.

Next, we'll use corrective exercises to resolve these issues and get you back to pain-free training.

Step 3: Stimulate

Now that we've pinpointed the root cause of your joint pain—whether it's a mobility, stability, or motor control issue—it's time to take action.

The goal here is to stimulate the muscles and joints responsible for the dysfunction using targeted corrective exercises.

These exercises are designed to specifically address the underlying issue and restore proper movement patterns, so you can train pain-free and perform at your best.

Focus on Targeted Areas

The corrective exercises you use will vary based on the type of dysfunction we identified in **Isolate**.

Whether we need to increase mobility, build stability, or improve motor control, each exercise will be targeted to help you get back to your best self.

Here's a breakdown of how we approach each category:

1. Mobility Work

If you've been dealing with stiffness in your joints or tight muscles restricting your movement, mobility exercises are crucial.

Mobility exercises can include:

- **Joint Mobilizations**: Improve joint mechanics, like banded ankle mobilizations to restore dorsiflexion for deeper squats.
- **Dynamic Stretching**: Prepares muscles and joints pre-workout with controlled movements like leg swings or arm circles.
- **Static Stretching**: Lengthens tight muscles post-workout, such as deep lunges for hip and hamstring flexibility.
- **Eccentric and Pause Lifting**: Builds strength and mobility through slow, controlled lowering or pausing during lifts, like tempo squats.

Using these techniques improves joint function, addresses restrictions, and keeps you moving pain-free.

2. Stability Training

Addressing stability issues involves strengthening the muscles that support your joints and control movement during complex lifts or workouts.

We focus on these key methods:

- **Holds**: Exercises like planks or handstand holds train static stability by keeping joints steady under tension.
- **Unilateral Training**: Single-leg deadlifts or split squats improve balance and strengthen each side individually, correcting imbalances.

- **Tempo Training**: Slower reps, such as tempo push-ups, develop control by challenging muscles to stabilize through each phase of movement.

For example:

- **Shoulder Stability**: Scapular push-ups or tempo banded dislocations improve control in overhead movements.

- **Core Stability**: Dead bugs, pallof presses, or plank variations build a strong core, reducing strain on the back and hips.

These techniques reinforce joint support, enhance control, and reduce injury risk.

3. Motor Control Training

Motor control issues arise when the coordination between muscles and the nervous system is off, even if strength and mobility are sufficient.

Training motor control involves improving movement patterns through focused repetition, frequent practice, and strategic progression.

The 4x4 Matrix for building motor control is a useful tool for addressing these deficits by working through four stages of progression.

The 4x4 Matrix

1. **Static Unsupported**: Learning movement patterns without added complexity, like practicing a controlled squat.

2. **Static Supported**: Using assistance, such as holding onto a support, to refine motor patterns.

3. **Dynamic Unsupported**: Progressing to movements like single-leg Romanian deadlifts or bodyweight lunges.

4. **Dynamic Supported**: Adding external challenges, like resistance bands or unstable surfaces, to reinforce control.

Step 4: Integrate

Now that you've addressed the root causes of your joint pain through targeted mobility, stability, and motor control exercises, it's time to integrate these improvements into your CrossFit training.

The goal here is to gradually and safely apply the gains you've made in movement quality to your functional workouts, all while ensuring that your joints are fully supported and protected.

Progression Is Key

The key to integrating new movement patterns is progressive overload, but in a way that respects the progress you've made in improving mobility and stability.

This means applying the changes you've made from simpler, corrective exercises to more complex CrossFit movements.

It's important to move step-by-step from less demanding to more challenging movements so that your body has time to adapt, ensuring long-term results.

Increase Complexity Gradually

Once you've mastered the basic movements and feel confident that your body is handling them without pain, you can gradually increase the complexity of the movements.

This is where your strength and mobility gains come to life in the context of CrossFit training.

From Goblet Squat to Back Squat

If you've built better hip mobility and core stability, the next step would be moving on to more challenging movements like the back squat.

This will add weight and complexity but will be much easier and more efficient now that your body is aligned and ready to handle the load.

From Dumbbell Presses to Barbell Presses

After your shoulders have gained stability, you can safely progress from dumbbell overhead presses to barbell presses.

This allows you to load the movement while maintaining the integrity of your shoulder joints.

At this point, my clients have:

1. Continued to train non-painful movements as much as possible.
2. Assessed their movement
3. Isolated the cause of their dysfunction
4. Used corrective exercises to address the dysfunction
5. Reintegrated their newfound mobility, stability, or motor control back into traditional CrossFit movements
6. We have progressed back to pain-free training, with new PRs coming soon!

Wrapping Up on Pain-Free CrossFit Training

By addressing mobility, stability, and motor control, you can eliminate the root causes of pain and unlock your full potential in training.

These strategies ensure your body moves efficiently, stays resilient, and performs at its best without setbacks.

If you're tired of struggling with discomfort or inconsistent progress, it's time to take a smarter approach to your training.

I hope this guide has shed some light on how I help my clients eliminate joint pain with a streamlined, repeatable process—all while continuing to train and build their fitness.

The goal isn't just to fix what's holding you back but to equip you with the tools to move confidently, train pain-free, and unlock your full potential.

Are You Ready to Train Pain-Free?

If you're ready to eliminate joint pain and get back to crushing your workouts, I can help you create a customized plan tailored to your specific needs with my **1:1 Pain-Free Performance Program**.

This program is designed to target your pain, improve your movement, and help you return to full performance—without missing a single workout.

To get started, **book your risk-free consultation today** and take the first step toward training pain-free!

CLICK HERE TO BOOK YOUR FREE CONSULTATION!