

RELAXATION

Dealing with the tension and anxiety resulting from chronic pain.

Hints and Tips

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CHRONIC PAIN AND STRESS

Chronic pain can create or exacerbate a wide range of psychological, emotional and practical problems which can make it even more difficult to cope with the diagnosis. It is natural to have negative thoughts at times and to feel tense and anxious about what is happening to you. Learning to reduce muscular tension and anxiety can greatly improve the quality of life.

Keeping the body in a constant state of muscular tension can create a wide range of physical symptoms including aching neck and shoulders, chronic fatigue and indigestion. The symptoms of anxiety include racing thoughts, headaches, loss of appetite and difficulty in sleeping. People vary in the levels of tension and anxiety that they can tolerate but if the symptoms become severe they can be quite disabling. Fortunately, there is something that can be done. Many people have already developed their own method for dealing with anxiety and stress and these can be applied just as successfully to coping with chronic pain. Others decide to learn to relax or meditate to gain control of their pain. There are many different methods. We are all individuals and your way of coping with your diagnosis might be quite different from other people.

The aim of this booklet is to introduce some methods of controlling tension and anxiety and to let you know that further help is available. It describes simple techniques to help you relax and regain some control over your life. Choose what you think might be useful for you, and more importantly whatever you choose to do, enjoy it.

BECOME INFORMED ABOUT YOUR ILLNESS

A major contributor to the development of stress is fear of the unknown and uncertainty about the future. Finding out about your illness, the treatments that are proposed and your prognosis is the first step to understanding the reality of what you are facing. What has happened to other people will not necessarily happen to you.

HINTS FOR STRESS REDUCTION

- Get to know your body's normal reactions so that you can recognise when you are tense. Shallow breathing and a fast pulse are often an indication of your body's reaction to stress.
- Communicate. Talking to other people can be a valuable way to deal with your problems and reduce stress associated with them.
- Learn to relax. Deep breathing is a natural relaxant. Try to take several deep breaths each hour. Try the simple exercise on page 4.
- Adequate exercise will help you to reduce tension. Even a gentle walk can loosen you up and many people find physical activity leads to improved well being. Do check with your doctor about when you can start exercises and what sort are appropriate.
- Gentle massage can be very relaxing and an activity to share with your family or friends.
- Try to smile and laugh. You will be surprised how good it can make you feel, even if laughing was the last thing you thought you could do.
- Have fun, learn to play a little. Keep up your hobbies and try to get out of the house regularly, even if only for short outings.
- Listen to relaxing music in peaceful surroundings. Let other people know you do not want to be disturbed for a while.
- Your religion or spiritual beliefs may be very supportive and a Minister, Priest, Rabbi or Iman can be a valuable spiritual counsellor.
- Be aware of your needs. Take to rest when you are tired. Limit your intake of tea and coffee and eat a well balanced diet. Be nice to yourself.
- Learn to make lists. Writing down a daily list of your priorities helps avoid too many deadlines and to achieve what you want to do.
- Take control of your own life. Live up to your expectations, not someone else's. Have the courage to say "no" when extra commitments will cause pressure.

PROBLEM SOLVING

When things become so overwhelming that you can't see a way out of your problems, it may help to sit down quietly somewhere, take a few deep breaths and try to look at things objectively.

Don't be afraid to talk to someone else about your problems. You may choose someone in your family, a friend or a professional counsellor.

- Look at all the different causes of your tension and identify one that you want to do something about.
- List all the possible options and solutions that are open to you. List even the ones that seem silly, and remember that to do nothing can also be an option.
- Select one solution which is realistic and that you feel has a fair chance of succeeding.
- Give it an honest try.
- After a reasonable period, sit back again and evaluate your success.

MEDITATION

Meditation is simply a state of total relaxation of the mind and body and everyone can benefit from achieving this.

Whereas many relaxation methods, such as the one on this page use conscious relaxation of the muscles to lead to mental relaxation, meditation works the other way round. Learning to quieten the mind can lead to a decrease in the heart rate and relaxation of the muscles.

There are different methods which can be used to empty your mind of thoughts and they are not difficult to learn although they do require practice. Audio tapes and books are available although many people prefer to learn with a teacher or in a group.

If you want to meditate, try to set aside a regular period each day 20-40 minutes is enough but avoid times when you are over-tired or have just eaten a heavy meal. Choose a quiet environment with no distractions and sit in a comfortable position.

HYPNOTHERAPY

Hypnotherapy can be valuable in helping people cope with chronic pain.

- learning to deal with anxiety
- achieving a deep state of relaxation
- controlling pain and decreased activity
- problem solving in combination with counselling

Hypnosis can be described as a state of intensified attention and receptiveness but precisely how it works is still largely unknown. Qualified hypnotherapists often have a medical or psychology background and are able to use a variety of different methods to induce hypnosis in another person. How deeply a person responds depends on many different factors but most people gain some benefit. A hypnotised person cannot be made to do anything against their will.

HELP IS AVAILABLE

Talk to the doctors and nurses involved in your treatment about any problems you might be having. Ask if they can help you or refer you to someone who can.

- Seek medical advice for tension. Sometimes medication can help to control the acute symptoms of severe anxiety. Then you can start to use other methods to relax or sort out your problems effectively.
- Psychotherapy can be an effective method to relieve anxiety and counselling is available from a wide range of health professionals such as psychologists, social workers and nurses.
- Join your local pain support group. Talking to other people who have faced chronic pain may be what you want. Many groups also teach relaxation, meditation and problem solving techniques.
- Join a relaxation class. A class may be offered by your local community health centre, psychologists in private practice or at specialists centres.
- Purchase a relaxation or meditation tape that you can listen to at home. A wide variety are available through commercial outlets.
- Learn a gentle relaxation exercise such as yoga or tai chi. Yoga, health and fitness and relaxation centres are listed in the Yellow pages telephone directory.
- Meditation groups and teaching are offered by many religious and secular organisations and a range of health and welfare professionals.

Hypnotherapists provide assistance for a wide range of problems. Call the Australian Society of Hypnosis for a referral to one of their members.

Exercise 1 - A SIMPLE RELAXATION TECHNIQUE

A simple technique such as the one described here can allow the body to relax, and so help you to avoid the harmful build-up of tension. Before you start to relax, why not take the telephone off the hook and a note on the door so that you are not disturbed.

- (a) Lie, stand or sit with your feet apart. Rest your hands loosely in your lap.
- (b) Close your eyes and slow down for a few minutes, by breathing a little more deeply and slowly than usual.
- (c) Be conscious of the tension in your whole body, through your toes, feet, calves, thighs, abdomen, chest, back, fingers, arms, shoulders, neck, scalp and face.
- (d) Now, each time you breathe out, allow some of the tension to go out of these areas. Let all your muscles slowly relax and enjoy the feeling of peace and calm which comes from total relaxation.
- (e) Open your eyes, stretch slowly, and return to your day.

Allow yourself a regular period of relaxation. Ten to fifteen minutes, twice a day, may be sufficient.

You might like to make a relaxation tape for yourself with soothing instructions and music or you can buy a tape to suit yourself.

Exercise 2: Slow rhythmic breathing for relaxation

1. Breathe in slowly and deeply.
2. As you breathe out slowly, feel yourself beginning to relax; feel the tension leaving your body.
3. Now breathe in and out slowly and regularly, at whatever rate is comfortable for you. You may wish to try abdominal breathing.
4. To help you focus on your breathing and breathe slowly and rhythmically:
 - (a) breathe in as you say silently to yourself, "in, two, three";
 - (b) breathe out as you say silently to yourself, "out, two, three." Or
 - (c) Each time you breathe out, say silently to yourself a word such as "peace" or "relax."
5. Do steps 1 through 4 only once or repeat steps 3 and 4 for up to 20 minutes.
6. End with a slow deep breath. As you breathe out say to yourself, "I feel alert and relaxed."

Exercise 2. Simple touch, massage, or warmth for relaxation

Touch and massage are age-old methods of helping others relax.

Some examples are:

- (1) Brief touch or massage, eg., hand holding or briefly touching or rubbing a person's shoulder.
- (2) Warm foot soak in a basin of warm water, or wrap the feet in a warm, wet towel.
- (3) Massage (3 to 10 minutes) may consist of whole body or be restricted to back, feet, or hands. If the patient is modest or cannot move or turn easily in bed, consider massage of the hands and feet.
 - Use a warm lubricant, eg., a small bowl of hand lotion may be warmed in the microwave oven, or a bottle of lotion may be warmed by placing it in a sink of hot water for about 10 minutes.
 - Massage for relaxation is usually done with smooth, long, slow strokes. (Rapid strokes, circular movements, and squeezing of tissues tend to stimulate circulation and increase arousal.) However, try several degrees of pressure along with different types of massage, eg., kneading, stroking, and circling. Determine which is preferred.

Especially for the elderly person, a back rub that effectively produces relaxation may consist of no more than 3 minutes of slow, rhythmic stroking (about 60 strokes per minute] on both sides of the spinous process from the crown of the head to the lower back. Continuous hand contact is maintained by starting one hand down the back as the other hand stops at the lower back and is raised. Set aside a regular time for the massage. This gives the patient something to look forward to and depend on.

Exercise 3. Peaceful past experiences

Something may have happened to you a while ago that brought you peace and comfort. You may be able to draw on that past experience to bring you peace or comfort now. Think about these questions:

1. Can you remember any situation, even when you were a child, when you felt calm, peaceful, secure, hopeful, or comfortable?
2. Have you ever daydreamed about something peaceful? What were you thinking of?
3. Do you get a dreamy feeling when you listen to music? Do you have any favourite music?
4. Do you have any favourite poetry that you find uplifting or reassuring?
5. Have you ever been religiously active? Do you have favourite readings, hymns, or prayers? Even if you haven't heard or thought of them for many years, childhood religious experiences may still be very soothing.

Additional points: Very likely some of the things you think of in answer to these questions can be recorded for you, such as your favourite music or a prayer. Then, you can listen to the tape whenever you wish. Or, if your memory is strong, you may simply close your eyes and recall the events or words.

Exercise 4. Active listening to recorded music

1. Obtain the following:
 - A cassette player or tape recorder. (Small, battery-operated ones are more convenient)
 - Earphone or headset. This is a more demanding stimulus than a speaker a few feet away, and it avoids disturbing others.)
 - Cassette of music you like. (Most people prefer fast, lively music, but some select relaxing music. Other options are comedy routines, sporting events, old radio shows, or stories.)
2. Mark time to the music, eg., tap out the rhythm with your finger or nod your head. This helps you concentrate on the music rather than your discomfort.
3. Keep your eyes open and focus steadily on one stationary spot or object. If you wish to close your eyes, picture something about the music.
4. Listen to the music at a comfortable volume. If the discomfort increases, try increasing the volume; decrease the volume when the discomfort decreases.
5. If this is not effective enough, try adding or changing one or more of the following: massage your body in rhythm to the music; try other music; mark time to the music in more than one manner, eg., tap your foot and finger at the same time.

Additional points: Many patients have found this technique to be helpful. It tends to be very popular, probably because the equipment is usually readily available and is a part of daily life. Other advantages are that it is easy to learn and is not physically or mentally demanding. If you are very tired, you may simply listen to the music and omit marking time or focusing on a spot
(Source: McCaffery and Beebe, 1989)

Contacts for More Information on Chronic Pain

1. **Peninsula Community Health Services,**
19 Albert St., Mornington, Tel: 5975 8257
2. **Frankston Pain Management**
7/20 Clarendon St. Frankston, 3199. Tel: 9770 0522
3. **Arthritis Foundation Victoria**
PO Box 130, Caulfield South, 3162. Tel: 9530 0255
4. **Caulfield Pain Management & Research Centre**
Caulfield General Medical Centre, 260 Kooyong Rd, Caulfield. Tel: 9276 6834
5. **The Barbara Walker Centre for Pain Management**
St Vincents Hospital, 41 Victoria Parade, Fitzroy, 3065. Tel: 9288 4681
6. **Bethesda Pain Clinic,**
30 Erin St Richmond, 3121. Tel: 9420 5239
7. **Kingston Pain Clinic (people over 60years)**
Warrigul Road, Cheltenham. Tel: 9265 1401

Web Resources:

MoodGYM

ANU web based program for clinicians and patients
<http://moodgym.anu.edu.au/welcome.asp#>
<http://moodgym.anu.edu.au/>

Emotional Freedom Techniques

Where emotional relief brings physical health

Self help method often works where nothing else will
No Drugs Involved ~ High Success Rate
<http://www.emofree.com/>

Beyond Blue

National depression initiative
<http://www.beyondblue.org.au/index.aspx?>

More Information:

You may also like to read (and buy for later re-reading) a self-help book called "Manage Your Pain", written by Michael Nicholas and the Royal North Shore Hospital pain management team. This book is available from local libraries, good book shops or my office (20 Clarendon St, Frankston, Tel: 03 9770 0522)

A relaxation training CD is also available from my office (20 Clarendon St, Frankston, Tel: 03 9770 0522).

You may also like to read another book called "Explain Pain" written by David Butler and Lorimer Moseley