Relaxation and Pain

Everyone suffering from chronic pain will have tried to find ways of coping with the condition. Different people find different methods that work best for them. One way of coping may work well for one person but might not work well for someone else. However there are some methods of coping with pain which do help most people if they take enough time to practice. Relaxation is one such technique.

Why learning to relax is helpful

1. When we know something is going to hurt us, our bodies tense up in a natural and automatic response.

To give some examples:
  a) A ball is thrown and it is about to hit you but you can’t get out of the way. You automatically flinch and tense up your body to try and protect yourself.
  b) You are about to have an injection. It is not unusual to be tense - even if you’re told to relax!
  c) You know that a certain movement (such as getting out of a chair) increases your pain. It is likely you will tense your body before you actually move. This happens even if you’re not actually aware you are doing this.

So, it is a natural response to tense the muscles of the body, both when we are expecting pain and also when pain is actually experienced.

2. Muscle tension is a normal and commonly experienced response to pain. However, tensioning muscles can actually make your experience of pain worse.

If people can relax their muscles and be in a relaxed state, they can tolerate pain more easily. For example, if you are able to relax before a painful injection then this can make it more bearable. Prolonged muscle tension can also have other effects.

- Prolonged muscle tension can cause aches, discomfort and tiredness. For example, think of being a car driver or passenger. At the end of long journeys we can often feel full of aches and pains. This can be the result of tensing our bodies while being in the car.
• Muscle tension can cause simple movements (such as walking or getting out of a chair) to become stiff and slow.

• Tensing muscles in response to pain can end up leading to pain in other parts of our body. For example, back pain can cause headaches, leg pain and shoulder pain.

• When people have pain over a long period of time, some muscle tension can seem normal. This means a person may be physically tense without even being aware of it.

**So, muscle tension can make the experience of pain worse.**

**Emotions and muscle tension**

It has been shown that different emotions (such as worrying, frustration, irritability and stress) can cause tension.

These emotions can result in a physical reaction known as the stress response. This is a normal response where we feel like the body is being put into a higher gear or being switched into overdrive. Our heart rate speeds up, blood pressure increases, blood flow to the muscles increases and muscles tense up. The lungs increase the amount of air we take in and our breathing speeds up. Many physical changes occur to prepare our bodies to “take action” in response to stress.

There are many sources of stress:

• Pain itself is a source of stress

• The consequences of coping with a chronic pain are often stressful. These include loss of job or abilities, changes in lifestyle and conflicts with health professionals and family.

• Stress can also result from the various demands and hassles of everyday life that have nothing to do with the pain condition.

Whatever the source, stress and muscle tension can affect the experience of pain. It does not just affect the physical experience of pain. It can also affect how we think and feel about the pain. Stress and tension are a normal part of living. Problems can occur, however, when there is an excess of stress and tension.

**So, emotions can lead to tension which can make the experience of pain worse.**
What can learning to relax do for you?

Reducing muscle tension by the use of relaxation techniques has helped many people with pain.

- When your muscles are deeply and comfortably relaxed a number of beneficial changes occur in your body. These changes are basically opposite to those changes caused by stress and tension. For example, blood pressure may be reduced, heart rate can slow down and rate of breathing may become slower and deeper. You will feel calmer, more comfortable and your tolerance of pain may improve.

- Learning to relax can help you to become more aware of when you are tense. By becoming more aware of tension, it becomes easier to do something about it.

- Relaxation techniques can be used to divert your attention away from pain. You cannot fully concentrate on more than one thing at a time. So, relaxation methods can be used to help distract you from any pain that you may be feeling, even when you are just resting.

- Relaxation can help with sleep problems. It can be especially useful in helping you get to sleep at night.

- Relaxation can help you develop skills in self-hypnosis. You can imagine different experiences which can help to make pain more bearable.

So, relaxation can change your experience of pain. It can also be helpful in dealing with stress problems and it can be beneficial to general physical health.

How to learn to relax

1. Relaxation is a skill and requires practice - Relaxation is a skill that needs to be learnt and, like any skill, requires practice. Some people learn to relax easily but for others it takes longer and requires much more practice. Relaxation is not usually learnt overnight, so be prepared to be patient and persistent!

2. Practice regularly - Set aside enough time to practice. At least once a day is recommended during the period of time that you are learning to relax.

3. Give yourself a chance to relax - It is usually best to begin to practice relaxation in a quiet place and at times when you are least likely to be interrupted. Also, when you first begin, relax when your pain is at a tolerable level.
Most people find it difficult to concentrate on relaxation when they are tired, tense, upset or are experiencing intense pain. As you become more skilled at relaxation you will be able to use it at more difficult times. In fact, it will be at these times that you may find relaxation skills most useful.

4. Find a comfortable position - Make sure that you find the most comfortable position for the time required to relax. The most important thing is that the whole of your body is supported. The following points may be helpful for when you are lying down or sitting:

**Lying down**
- Have your arms by your side and let your palms roll gently outwards. Have your elbows out and your fingers apart.
- Support your neck and your knees.
- Avoid lying on anything too squashy or you may be tensing muscles unnecessarily.

**Sitting**
- Have your legs uncrossed with both feet flat on the ground. If your legs are resting on a footstool, keep your legs uncrossed and allow your legs to lie apart and let your feet face away from each other.
- Sit with your body, legs and hips straight in the chair and make sure your back is supported.
- Rest your hands and arms on your lap or on the arms of the chair.
- Let your hands lie comfortably apart and allow your fingers to be apart (like an open set of claws).
- Have your head and neck supported by the back of the chair and sit as straight as possible in the chair.
- You can shift position during relaxation, allowing yourself to be in as comfortable a position as possible.

5. Close your eyes - This usually helps with concentration and relaxation.

6. There are many different ways to relax - You may have been provided with a relaxation CD by our service; alternatively, there are many different types of relaxation CDs available – some focus on relaxing imagery, some on tuning in to the sounds of nature or of music, some on altering sensations in different parts of your body.

Among the most popular of approaches is to concentrate on your breathing – some people find it best to breathe in through their nose and out through their mouth. Once you get the rhythm, you might imagine that every time you are breathing out, you are breathing out any stress or physical tension from your body.
Another popular approach is to imagine being in a special place – either somewhere you’ve been in the past or somewhere you dream up from your imagination. Use as many senses as possible – sight, sound, taste, smell and physical feel – to connect with how good and relaxing it is to be in that special place.

The important thing is adopt an open and curious attitude and explore different approaches – to give yourself the best chance of finding something that works really well for you.

7. Keep a positive attitude if you find it difficult to concentrate - You may find concentrating on relaxing difficult at first, perhaps because of pain or because your mind wanders off onto other thoughts. This is nothing to worry about - stay positive.

Just do your best to bring your attention back to relaxation. This may take practice, but you will find that over time, you will be able to increase how long you can concentrate.

8. Be realistic - Relaxation can help you to manage your pain and feel more in control. It is just one of a number of strategies to help you cope. There will be times when you think it is helpful and there may be times when you don’t. If it “doesn’t work”, don’t give up on relaxation forever. Painkillers don’t always help with pain, but people take them in the hope that they may “help this time”. So in the same way, allow yourself the opportunity to use relaxation to help. You may even surprise yourself!

For a downloadable version of our relaxation CD please visit: http://www.codeinefree.org/relaxation.php

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