

Complementary and Alternative Pain Management

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Many people don't realize how valuable non-pharmacological methods are in the treatment of pain. Some approaches use sensation to overcome the pathways pain travels between the place of hurt and the brain. Here are a couple examples of this: Use ice on a swollen ankle to cool the tissue. Rub your hurt hand after banging it. The ice and rubbing pressure over rides some of the pain messages traveling to your brain.

Certainly many pain conditions give you stress, and stress can aggravate pain. Approaches that help lower stress are valuable complementary therapies. Relaxation can help pain medicines work quicker and last longer. It is possible with deep relaxation practice to release the body's natural pain medicine, **endorphins**. A good belly laugh or exercise can also release these pain-fighting chemicals.

Behavioral pain management approaches like learning to say no and not feel guilty, grief work around loss of health, and pacing activity and rest, can use one's own actions and reactions as important tools to help ourselves control pain instead of pain controlling us.

It is important to know why pain is present, it can be a warning sign of danger, such as chest pain or the pain of a broken bone. Discuss your pain problem with your health care provider.

These are some examples of complementary therapies that can be a valuable part of your pain treatment plan.

Abdominal breathing Let your abdomen be soft and gently rise with the inhale and fall with the exhale. If this is difficult for you to do, try blowing out all the air from the lungs and the next breath will usually be abdominal. An alternative focus: If there is pain in the abdomen, or anxiety about breathing in general, let the belly be soft but notice the air at the tip of the nose go in and out.

Activity-Rest Cycling In chronic pain and recovery from a health problem, over-activity when you start to feel better is common, but can end up triggering more pain. You've been sick, frustrated in bed, start to feel better and you push to get things done. This pushing can actually trigger a cycle of more pain. This disappointing setback slows a person again, which leads to further frustration. A suggestion for a person in lingering pain can be to be active but then rest before you get too tired or rest before the pain gets severe. Continue active-rest cycling throughout the day.

Acupuncture Research shows that as part of a comprehensive pain treatment plan a trained, certified acupuncture practitioner can place a series of very thin needles and provide relief for postoperative dental pain; headaches; tennis elbow; menstrual cramps; carpal tunnel syndrome and addictions.

Assertive communication training Strengthen your speaking and listening skills. It is OK to ask for what you want. One might not always get what they want but the chances certainly go up by asking. OK to ask questions and seek information. OK to say no and not feel guilty. Assertive communication is open, honest, direct and respectful.

Brief progressive muscle relaxation Starting from head to feet, or feet to head (in general start away from the pain); gently tensing and relaxing muscle groups. AVOID tensing muscles directly around the pain. An alternative method is to gently relax your muscles without first tensing. "I am bringing my awareness to my right foot and letting the muscles of my right foot soften and relax. Letting them become warm and heavy." Let the bed or chair support your body.

Calming Self-Statements You can learn to replace overly negative thought patterns that contribute to mental distress and increased pain with calming self-statements. The "I can't do anything anymore," becomes "I may not be able to do certain things, but there are plenty of other activities that I can enjoy." People with pain can be on the lookout for overly negative thoughts, and substitute calming self-statements. Note the effect these new thoughts have on your mood and pain. This calming thinking can cut down on anxiety and depression.

Cold Packs/Heating Pads Good for lower back pain and cramps. Try alternating heat, rest and cold. See if cold or heat alone can help you. Be careful not to burn your skin.

Counseling 80% of people with chronic pain become depressed at some point. Speaking with a professional you trust, can help in coping with the normal difficult feelings that arise with loss of health and/or the ability to do what you want to do. For example having a down day is not unusual for most people, but when the down day stretches into three or more days, that can be a time to ask for help.

Distraction Techniques There are many examples of distraction techniques people with pain have found helpful. "Focal point," concentrating on one point and blocking everything else out. Counting backwards. Art.

Journeying. Music. TV. Videos or audio tapes. Hobbies. Word games. A change of scenery gets your mind off things. Pet therapy. Humor and having fun. Getting out in nature. What can you add?

Environmental change Adjusting room temperature. Organize, clear your space. Adjust lighting. Lower sound of TV, and other sounds that may be too distracting.

Exercise Chronic pain inhibits activity. Though difficult at first, exercise can improve chronic pain. Consider a physical therapy consultation for an exercise plan.

Humor, fun, enjoyment Some times when we hurt we eliminate the fun things in life, but think about when you felt good and you did fun things. You felt BETTER. Feeling better is what pain management is about.

Massage therapy from a skilled, trained practitioner can help with many types of muscular pain.

Pain education Learn the importance of pain scales and use one when communicating with your health care team. Learn the best schedules about taking pain medications. Learn about side effects of pain medicines and what YOU can do about them. Gain an understanding of information about your health problem (s). Ask questions and get information about tests and procedures. Learn about the effects of stress on pain. Looking over this website is a good example!

Relaxation Techniques Meditation, biofeedback, guided imagery, progressive muscle relaxation, visualization, hypnosis are mind/body self-regulatory skills beneficial in pain management.

Service to others who are suffering. Being present in a concerned way with another person who is hurting can sometimes make our problems seem less.

Shifting Positions Take time to find a more comfortable position. Use pillows for body posture support. Too much time in bed can drain a person physically. Be careful not to push yourself too hard and overdo it.

Social support Enjoy time with family, and friends. If people want to give to you let them. Be careful not to become overtired. Some people find speaking with a close female friend can be very supportive. Medical support groups can be beneficial and people can share experience, strength and hope with one another.

Spiritual-Religious practices "Is religion or spirituality important to you, for some it is for some it isn't, how about you?" If yes, a minister or representative from your home church/synagogue can be comforting. Many religious faiths encourage practices like attending services, prayer, spiritual study that help with coping with pain or illness. Hospital chaplains are available. They can help a person find meaning in their current life experience.

Stress management education This teaches about the connection between stress and physical problems. Relaxation training, stress coping and pain management strategies are taught.