Distraction for OA Pain Management

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Redirecting Your Focus Away From the Pain

The pain that osteoarthritis can cause has many wide-ranging effects; it can affect you socially, financially, spiritually, and emotionally. On top of all these facets of life, pain can also put a damper on one's ability to focus and direct their train of thought towards anything else besides the pain.

Senses like hunger, smell, vision, temperature and pain usually do a great job of helping us ensure our bodies are taken care of. For example, your rumbling stomach lets you know you're hungry, and the burning sensation when you touch something hot lets you know it's harmful. These sensations come into our thoughts and are so strong that they can prevent us from thinking about anything else until we address that need.

Although the sensation of chronic pain is not productive to the needs of our body, it does a very effective job of preventing the pain sufferer from being able to focus on anything else. It is difficult to concentrate on the external environment when your internal sensations are screaming at you constantly.

According to the Integrative Pain Center of Arizona, the science behind why this occurs is "that constant pain raises the focus threshold for basic functioning, which leaves the pained person with a greatly reduced ability to find solutions or workarounds to even relatively mundane problems." Something small, which most people would be mildly annoyed by but ultimately take in stride, could seriously throw off someone who is already making a huge effort just to physically get through the day.

Many chronic pain sufferers have the instinct to seclude themselves and not do anything because of the fear of exacerbating the pain. Despite this being a normal reaction, one of the worst things a person in pain can do is sit in a room alone, feeling sorry for themselves and focusing on their pain. Secluding oneself from social interaction or societal inclusion can feed into the cycle of depression and more pain.

You must understand your physical limitations, but if you're going to be in pain why not try to divert your attention by doing something you enjoy? Many pain sufferers can still participate in therapeutic and enjoyable activities. And the ability to distract oneself from the pain can help to combat problems with focus.

The following are some things you can try to distract yourself from pain:

Meditation/Focus

Meditation and relaxation therapies can be a great way of breaking the cycle of focusing on your pain. A theory supported by a recent study on meditation explains that by activating and reinforcing some areas of the brain used in pain processing, meditation can reduce pain intensity in patients. Studies conducted within the past 10 years have shown that meditation may be able to change the four areas of the brain involved in pain processing or emotional and behavioral regulation. Pain is a terrible sensation but meditation helps to assert the notion that pain does not deserve such a strong emotional reaction and helps gain some control over it.

There are numerous other methods you can try to help bring back your ability to focus on anything besides the pain. Relaxation, positive visualization and biofeedback can all be helpful methods for easing pain and reframing thinking. Each of these techniques can help train your body to relax muscles and reduce chemical stress responses that are harmful to your body.

Next page: two more strategies for distracting yourself from pain.

Socialize

Socializing can be one of the most difficult activities to engage in when suffering from the chronic pain caused by arthritis. But it could also be one of the most beneficial activities a person with chronic pain could partake in. The benefits of socialization have been well documented; people who socialize experience lower stress, cope with adverse events better, and are generally healthier. On the other hand, a lack of socialization can lead to depression, anxiety and low self-esteem.

Socializing can also help a person in pain take their mind off the negative feelings, distract themselves in a productive manner and force themselves to escape the negative emotions associated with chronic pain.

Invest in Hobbies

In theory, it takes a very strong stimulus to pull a chronic pain sufferer's focus away from pain and direct it towards something else, so why not make it an activity you enjoy? Getting lost in a hobby can help you focus less on the pain, do something you enjoy, and possibly relax your mind.

Many chronic pain sufferers have found relief and a renewed enjoyment in their lives from art therapy. This could include listening to or playing music or working on an art project.

There has been increasing evidence behind the efficacy of art therapy. The science behind why it could work is that positive stimulation has been found to make a difference in the coping process; what a person is looking at can change how they experience pain. The stimulation of creative activities also promotes rehabilitation and a general sense of well-being.

Music therapy in particular has a long tradition in the treatment of pain and health disorders. Other possible benefits from art therapy are the activity level and creative capacity as a healing source, stimulation of positive emotional experience, facilitating projective coping and stimulation of imaginative experience and awareness.

Conclusion

Sometimes the hardest thing to do when you're suffering from the chronic pain of osteoarthritis is to not think about it constantly. Fortunately, there are several ways to pull your focus away from the pain. Although it’s natural for the pain you're in to occupy your mind, try not to let it be the only thing you think about.