



Mindfulness for Pain Relief in Five Simple Steps

Millions of people suffer from chronic pain due to injuries or diseases. Living with pain is not only a physical strain—be it merely uncomfortable to outright debilitating. It is an emotional strain as well. Feelings of frustration, anger, depression or even despair can deeply impact the quality of our lives.

One of the most widespread pain management options, medication, can take away the physical discomfort but at the same time often disturb our mental balance. It also may bring on a host of equally unpleasant physical side effects creating new health threats.

There is another option becoming very popular as a method to manage pain—meditation. MRIs show the brain of a person meditating has a significant decrease in pain reception (1).

Meditation (which is the ‘formal’ practice of mindfulness) changes the way the mind perceives pain (2) so that it’s more bearable. It is a natural and effective way to ease physical pain.

The idea of being mindful of pain may seem counterintuitive. Most people want to forget about their pain— they want to escape it, run away from it, wishing they could ignore it or get rid of it somehow. The problem is that by fighting and struggling against it, and even by trying to ignore it, you create a state of ‘resistance to what is’ and that means stress. Although it may take a little practice, it is possible to be in a relatively calm and content emotional state even when in physical pain.

Many people have found these techniques incredibly effective, and they can work wonders in pain reduction and help cultivate inner peace and equilibrium.

1. <http://www.minnpost.com/second-opinion/2011/04/mindfulness-meditation-can-help-reduce-pain-study-finds>

2. <http://www.livescience.com/9007-reduce-pain-alter-brain-meditation.html>
www.theacpa.org/uploads/chronicle_june2011_ONLINE_052911.pdf

The Body Scan: A Mindfulness Pain Management Technique

One popular method of mindfulness-based pain management is the “body scan.” The technique consists of five steps and takes about 20 to 30 minutes to complete. With practice, this or other mindfulness techniques like it, have been beneficial to many chronic pain sufferers.

Step 1: Preparation

The first step involves setting yourself up for your practice. Choose a quiet and comfortable place you can lie down. You don’t want to be distracted so let others know not to disturb you for the duration of your meditation. Turn off your phone or turn it to silent. Consider hanging a ‘do not disturb’ sign on your door.

Step 2: Grounding

After you are comfortable turn your awareness to your body. Feel the parts of your body that are in contact with the surface on which you’re lying. Also notice the position of your body. Mentally examine your body for any areas where there may be tension—the shoulders, the jaw, the stomach. See if you can consciously release or soften those areas of the body so that you can be totally relaxed.

Step 3: Present Moment Awareness

The third step is a decision to let go of the past and the future, let go of thoughts, and to be fully engaged in the present moment. Here you focus your awareness only on your body and let everything else drop away. You make the decision that whatever you do encounter while examining your body will be met with a sense of ‘friendliness’. Allow whatever you encounter to be as it is. You aim to meet it with equanimity and not to judge or label certain parts of the body or treat painful body parts as an enemy.

Step 4: The Body Scan

The fourth step is the actual “scan” part. With your mind, you scan—or turn your attention—to each part of your body, one at a time. You may start with one foot and give it all your attention. Feel into the whole foot. Notice any sensation of temperature. Be aware of any fabrics that may be in touch with the skin or the point where the air meets the skin. Any sensations are welcome. Does it feel heavy or tired? Don’t start engaging in thinking about it though- Simply aim to be aware of the sensations here. Continue the scan, moving your attention progressively up one leg and then the other, then to the torso, back arms, head and neck, focusing on part by part, one at a time.

Step 5: Whole Body Awareness

The fifth and final step is to become aware of the entire body as a connected whole. Bring awareness to your entire physical body and maintain that awareness for a few minutes. Feel the body from within. Again, aim to stay fully present. There is no need to think about the body. Simply feel into it.

Many people who have used mindfulness-based pain relief techniques report that it works very well for them. Their ability to cope with pain improves which, in turn, improves their quality of life. It also has the wonderful side benefit of alleviating much of the mental and emotional strain associated with chronic pain.

And most importantly, it does this with no risks or negative side effects— being completely natural, the only side effects are positive ones.