

Pain Reduction Techniques: Mind, Body, and Spirit

Pain is an experience that affects the mind, body, and spirit. These elements work together to increase or decrease the amount of suffering you feel from injury and illness. Understanding how this happens can help you cope with pain. Once you understand the basic principles, you can find many ways to put them into practice.

For example, the following can all help with pain management:

- Distraction
- Social interaction
- Aromatherapy
- Heat and ice
- Medication and treatment for medical causes of pain
- Mindfulness
- Healthy movement
- Healing environment
- Art and music
- Healing touch
- Sleep
- Nutrition
- Meditation
- Breathing strategies
- Guided imagery

How is pain interpreted by the brain?

1. When you get injured (hurt), fear getting injured, or have surgery, your body sends out a message.
2. Nerve pathways carry the message to your brain through your spinal cord. At the same time, your body and brain release natural chemical messengers like hormones and molecules that signal your body to prepare for an emergency. The purpose of these messengers is to help you heal and protect you from more harm.
3. Multiple brain areas work together to figure out what the messages mean and what to do to keep you safe.

Whether your medical treatment and healing is complete or on-going, it is important to find ways to manage pain so that you can continue living more fully over time.

What can I do to decrease the power of the pain I am feeling?

Because you have a powerful human brain, you can use your brain to think about what is happening to you based on the signals from the body. You can use your powerful brain to soften the pain messages that come into it. You may see this power in action when your brain is completely focused on a pleasant activity, like spending time with people you care about. Some suggestions for how to decrease the power of the pain you feel are below.

Connect with other people

Many people report that their pain doesn't bother them as much when they feel connected with other people. The brain is calmed by knowing that someone cares and is trying to help. Having the support of an encouraging person can help shift your attention away from the distress of your pain and increase your confidence that you can manage the situation. Research also shows that painful experiences are less likely to cause physical symptoms of distress (fast heart rate, higher blood pressure, stress hormone release, etc.) when there is a supportive person giving encouragement.

Also, feeling that we are part of something larger than ourselves is an important part of healing. Connecting with the people around us can be a way to create that element of healing.

Use distraction

Many people report that their pain doesn't bother them as much when they are distracted. The brain can only process a certain amount of information at once. If you focus your brain on a safe distraction instead of your pain, your mind

will be busy with the distraction instead of repeating the pain message. The pain messages may still be there to guide your healing, but the feeling of suffering may be less because your mind is busy with the distraction . Distraction can take many different forms, depending on the person and what's available. Be creative and adapt to your present situation to get distraction to work for your pain.

Start your body's relaxation system by using your breath

Many people report that breathing exercises help them get through moments of pain. Breathing exercises can decrease stress by slowing down both your mental and physical activity. Slowing down the body's physical responses sends a calming message to the brain that things are under control. Breathing exercises can help:

- Decrease tension in your body
- Slow your heart rate and breathing rate
- Focus your mind on something other than the pain
- Increase your sense of peace and well-being

Practice meditation



Many people use meditation to manage pain and improve their health and well-being. There are different types of [meditation](#) to choose from. In general, meditation is a practice that connects your mind and body, involving:

- Focused attention
- Relaxed breathing
- A safe and quiet setting
- An open, non-judgmental attitude
- And sometimes an element of rhythm and repetition

To learn more and get an introduction to [meditation](#), see the article “Meditation: A simple, fast way to reduce stress” on this Mayo Clinic webpage: [mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/meditation/in-depth/meditation/art-20045858](https://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/meditation/in-depth/meditation/art-20045858)



More resources for meditation:

Resource	Link	QR code
Audio meditations from HelpGuide.org	helpguide.org/home-pages/audio-meditations	
Guided relaxation exercises from the Benson-Henry Institute	bensonhenryinstitute.org/guided-relaxation-exercises	

Use guided imagery

Many people use guided imagery, or focusing the mind to imagine a happy or calming image, to decrease feelings of suffering and helplessness. As a reminder, the brain interprets pain from the body’s pain messages. You can use your mind to create [powerful images](#). This increases your mind’s ability to manage the pain signals entering your brain from your body.



There are many types of [guided imagery](#). For example, a common guided imagery exercise is to imagine yourself in a peaceful, relaxing place like a scene in nature or by the water. There are many other types of imagery exercises that involve visualizing your strengths. These help you to be resilient, or able to

manage and recover from difficult situations. Here is an example of a guided meditation you can try: [Safe Place Meditation--A Meditation to Help Ease Pain](#)



With a little guidance, you can learn to use your imagination to decrease the suffering from pain messages. Most people have images in their minds related to their pain. Some are negative (“it feels like a nail in my back”) and some are positive (“it feels like the skin is stitching itself back together to heal”). You can create your own images that decrease suffering. If someone you care about has a negative image, you can encourage them to come up with a positive image instead. There are many scripts available online to inspire your creative ideas.

More resources for guided imagery:

Resource	Link	QR code
“Tangy Lemon, A Guided Imagery Sample” video	youtube.com/watch?v=9cFsrzevk4c	
Guided imagery podcast list compiled by the Rogel Cancer Center	rogelcancercenter.org/podcasts/guided-imagery-podcasts#topics	


Practice mindfulness

Many people who have pain use mindfulness to decrease feelings of suffering. Mindfulness is the practice of paying attention to something without judging it. Mindfulness is a type of meditation where you choose to observe whatever passes through your mind with kindness. [Mindfulness meditation](#) can also

involve focusing on the details of an object or an experience as a way to draw attention away from feelings of pain. For example, you can focus on the melody or vibrations of a song or a soothing sound. Mindfulness meditation leads to better health and positive changes in the brain over time.

There are many ways to learn about and practice mindfulness. Health professionals (particularly behavioral health professionals, such as social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, and counselors) may be able to introduce you to mindfulness and help you start exploring which practices you like best. Insight Timer is a free website and mobile app for meditation and guided imagery that many people enjoy: insighttimer.com/meditation-app


More resources for mindfulness meditation:

Resource	Link	QR code
“Daily Calm 10 Minute Mindfulness Meditation” video	youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=Xl_B45DpMLU	

Do a mind-body exercise to relax your muscles

Have you ever noticed that your muscles feel very tight for no clear reason? Many people automatically tighten their muscles to try to protect themselves against stress and pain. This tightness can cause soreness. Releasing the tension in your muscles can reduce pain. Try using passive [progressive muscle relaxation](#) to soften your muscles. This is a practice where you relax muscles throughout your body by thinking about releasing tension from each body part. It can also help prepare your mind and body for restful sleep.

More resources for muscle relaxation:

Resource	Link	QR code
"Passive Progressive Muscle Relaxation for Procedures" video	youtube.com/watch?v=hym175Yxjas	


Remember: thoughts and beliefs matter


Research shows that if you believe a new technique can decrease your suffering, it's more likely that it will. By keeping an open attitude, you may surprise yourself and discover new ways to manage your pain. You may enjoy your life more fully, even if the pain is not completely gone. Some examples of creative options to try include:

- Smelling the scent of lavender oil
- Gentle movement (make sure to follow your doctor's medical recommendations for your specific condition)
- Setting up a movie night with friends
- Creating art collages of your favorite things

If you choose not to believe that your mind can help you feel less suffering, you decrease its potential power. Your brain can be an amazing pain management tool if you learn how to use it.

Where can I find more information?

Resource info	QR code
<p>Video: This video, “Understanding Pain,” describes how pain works: vimeo.com/137163303</p>	
<p>Website: University of Michigan resource with videos on pain, treatments, and self-management: PainGuide.com</p>	
<p>Podcast: The Hidden Brain: “All The World’s A Stage – Including The Doctor’s Office:” tinyurl.com/2kl3l5zc</p>	
<p>Webinar: “Breakthrough with Healing Chronic Pain Howard Schubiner Talks at Google:” youtube.com/watch?v=0VyH1laOd2M</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A note about this presentation if you have physical causes of your pain: this presentation will show you the power the mind has to create symptoms. It will also show the mind’s power to increase or decrease pain signals that arrive in your brain. Many people find the way that Dr. Schubiner presents these ideas to be empowering even if you have medical or physical causes of pain. If the brain is powerful enough to create symptoms, it is also powerful enough to change how you feel symptoms. 	

Resource info	QR code
<p>App: Curable (for chronic pain): www.curablehealth.com/help#help-top-faq/general/what-is-curable</p>	

For questions, contact:

Elissa (Lissa) H. Patterson, PhD

Phone: (734) 936-4878

Email: ehpatter@med.umich.edu

Disclaimer: This document contains information and/or instructional materials developed by University of Michigan (U-M) Health for the typical patient with your condition. It may include links to online content that was not created by U-M Health and for which U-M Health does not assume responsibility. It does not replace medical advice from your health care provider because your experience may differ from that of the typical patient. Talk to your health care provider if you have any questions about this document, your condition or your treatment plan.

Author: Elissa Patterson, PhD
 Edited by: Karelyn Munro, BA, Brittany Batell, MPH MSW

Patient Education by [U-M Health](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Public License](#). Last Revised 04/2023