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 identify countless ways to put them into practice.

For example, the following can all contribute to effective pain management:

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

**How is pain interpreted by the brain?**

1. The body sends signals to the brain from a site of injury.
2. Nerve pathways send the message through the spinal cord.
3. Hormones and molecules that cause inflammation may be released.
4. These messages reach the brain.
**What can I do to decrease the power of the pain I am feeling?**

The mind **interprets** messages coming into the brain from the body. As a human, you can use your powerful brain to think about what happens to you.

You can use that power to soften the pain messages that come into the brain. You may see this power in action when your brain is completely focused on a pleasant activity.

**Connect with other people**

Many people report that their pain is **less** bothersome when they feel connected with other people. The brain is soothed by knowing that someone genuinely cares and is trying to help. Having the support of an encouraging person can help shift attention away from the distress of the pain and boost confidence. Research also shows that people's vital signs (pulse, temperature, blood pressure etc.) do not change as much in response to pain when there is a supportive individual offering encouragement.

In addition, 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 is less bothersome when they are engaged in distraction. The brain can only process a certain amount of information at once. If you consciously focus your brain on a fun distraction, the mind has less room for interpreting and amplifying the pain messages as suffering. Distraction can take many different forms depending on the individual and the available resources. Be creative in adapting to your present circumstances to succeed with distraction.
Activate 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 helping slow down both mental and physical activity. Slowing down the body’s physical responses sends a reassuring message to the brain that things are under control. Breathing exercises can help:

- Decrease body tension
- Slow heart rate and respiration
- Activate the body’s relaxation system
- Focus the mind on something other than the pain
- Increase your sense of peace and well-being

Practice meditation
Many people use meditation as part of their toolbox to manage pain and enhance health and well-being. There are different types of meditation to choose from.

In general, meditation is a mind-body practice involving:
- Focused attention
- Relaxed breathing
- A safe and quiet setting
- An open non-judgmental stance
- And sometimes an element of rhythmic repetition (for more information see the article in the link below under the heading “Elements of meditation”).
- For an introduction to meditation, see the article “Meditation: A simple, fast way to reduce stress” on this Mayo Clinic webpage: www.tinyurl.com/202d76sg.
Use guided imagery
Many people use guided imagery to help the mind decrease feelings of suffering and helplessness. As a reminder, the brain interprets pain from the body’s pain messages. You can use the mind to create images of power. This increases the mind’s ability to manage the pain signals entering the brain from the 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.

With a little guidance, you can learn to use your imagination to ease 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 positive (“it feels like the skin is stitching itself back together”). 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. There are many scripts available online to inspire your creative ideas.

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 can be understood as 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 as a way to draw attention away from painful sensations. For example, you can focus on the melody or vibrations of a song or a soothing sound. Mindfulness meditation leads to better health and beneficial 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 are enjoying: https://insighttimer.com/meditation-app

**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 contract their muscles as a way to protect against stress and pain. This tightness can cause soreness. Releasing the tension in your muscles can help relieve pain. Try using passive progressive relaxation to soften your muscles. It can also help prepare your mind and body for restful sleep. See this YouTube video for an example: Passive Muscle Relaxation to Manage Anxiety and Stress: https://tinyurl.com/4qvclgmr

**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 maintaining 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 (with 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 awe-inspiring pain management tool if you learn how to use it.
Where can I find more information?

- **Podcast:** The Hidden Brain: Pain and the Power of Our Beliefs: tinyurl.com/2kl3l5zc
- **Website:** University of Michigan resource with videos on pain, treatments, and self-management: PainGuide.com
- **Webinar:** Mind Body Syndrome: Dr. Howard Schubiner, MD: tinyurl.com/18xvijy

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.

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