



RELAXATION - A TOOL TO REDUCE PAIN

Studies show mind-body therapies like relaxation can reduce muscle tension, fatigue and joint tenderness. They can help you sleep better, and improve mood and quality of life.

Long-term pain as a signal to consciously relax

The experience of pain can activate the 'flight-fight-freeze' (sympathetic) response. This is your body's way of protecting you from danger. Your body releases stress chemicals which keep you constantly ready to react. Unfortunately, this tension can increase your experience of pain.

You can change this response by making a conscious decision to relax. Learning how to manage pain by using relaxation techniques helps change your body chemistry. When you do this, you reduce the pain experience and allow your body to go back to the 'rest and digest' (parasympathetic) setting.

How can relaxation work for me?

Building relaxation strategies into everyday life helps move the body towards 'rest and digest.' Over time we recognise how it feels to really relax.

During a flare-up of symptoms, it's easier to remember to use a strategy if it is already a habit.

When we know how it feels to be relaxed, we can actively use relaxation as a tool to calm the body and mind and reduce pain.

Techniques to try:

Breathing and Mindfulness

Mindfulness is becoming aware of your thoughts, feelings, and body sensations as you experience them. As you become more aware of these, you become better able to meet your own needs. For example, you become better at noticing when you are tired & need to rest, or need to get out for some exercise, and it allows space for an experience of peace and quiet away from daily demands.



Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Long-term stress increases muscle tension. This disturbs sleep, makes pain worse and increases fatigue. The goal is to release tension and learn to recognise what tension and relaxation sensations feel like in the body. Once you know the feeling, you can identify tension more easily and take steps to relax.

Put aside 15-20 minutes. Lie down in a quiet space. Move your attention through your body from head to toes. Tense and relax each muscle group one at a time (face & head, neck, arms, hands, back, stomach, chest, legs, feet) holding the tension for 5 seconds each time and then letting go. Breathe in when tensing, breathe out deeply when relaxing.



Sensory Modulation

This is using the senses (sights, sounds, smell, touch, taste, and movement) to sooth yourself in stressful situations. Noticing your senses can help you change how you feel and how you react. Examples include:

- the use of calming music or nature sounds
- sleep meditation
- essential oils
- a rocking chair
- gentle massage
- a weighted blanket
- low-level amber lighting
- an eye mask or cover
- soft ear plugs
- a heated wheat-bag
- quiet and calm surroundings.



If you wake in pain in the night, try using sensory modulation to calm your body and mind.



Psychological approaches

A psychologist or counsellor can help with different ways of dealing with negative thoughts and catastrophizing which often occur when you have pain. Therapies such as CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) and ACT (Acceptance & Commitment Therapy) can help you to learn skills to consciously replace unhelpful thoughts with new thought patterns that nurture wellbeing. Your body responds to your thoughts; when you have fearful thoughts your muscles tense up and pain increases. Working with your mind can help you find a way through a difficult situation.