

Imagery and Chronic Pain Control Techniques

The important role the mind plays in chronic pain is clearly recognized in the medical literature, as well as in the International Association for the Study of Pain's definition of pain, which states that 'pain is always subjective and is defined by the person who experiences it'.

The consequence is that the brain can also learn how to manage the sensation of pain. Using the mind to control chronic pain, or the use of coping strategies for managing persistent pain, may be used alone or in tandem with other pain management therapies.

Ideally, use of the chronic pain management techniques outlined in this information sheet can help patients feel less dependent on painkillers and feel more empowered to be able to control their pain.

Altered Focus

Focus your attention on any specific non-painful part of the body (foot, hand etc.) and alter the sensation in that part of the body. For example, imagine your hand warming up. This will take the mind away from focusing on the source of your pain, such as your back pain.

Sensory Splitting

This technique involves dividing the sensation (pain, burning, pins and needles) into separate parts. For example if the leg or back pain feels hot to you, focus just on the sensation of the heat and not on the hurting.

Mental Anesthesia/Analgesia

This involves imagining an injection of numbing anesthetic or injection of a strong painkiller into the painful area. Alternatively you can imagine your brain producing a large amount of endorphins (the body's natural pain relief) and having them flow to the painful parts of your body. Similarly you may wish to imagine a soothing ice pack being placed onto the area of the pain.

Transfer

Use your mind to produce altered sensations such as heat, cold, anesthetic, in a non-painful hand and then place the hand on the painful area. Envision transferring this pleasant, altered sensation into the painful area.

Age Progression/Regression

Use your mind's eye to project yourself forward or backward in time to when you are pain-free or experiencing much less pain. Then instruct yourself to act as if this image were true. It is important to not dwell on any negative thoughts whilst using this strategy.

Symbolic Imagery

Envision a symbol that represents your chronic pain, such as a loud irritating noise, painfully bright light bulb or colour that represents your pain. Gradually reduce the irritating qualities of this symbol, for example slowly reduce the colour, dim the light or reduce the volume of the noise, thereby reducing the pain.

Positive Imagery

Focus your attention on a pleasant place that you could imagine going where you feel carefree, safe and relaxed, for example: the beach or park.

Counting

Silent counting is a good way to deal with painful episodes. You might count breaths, count tiles or simply conjure up mental images and count them.

Pain Movement

Move chronic back pain from one area of your body to another where the pain is easier to cope with. For example mentally move your chronic back pain slowly into your hand or even out of your hand into the air.

Relaxation

Slowly relax every part of the body, segment by segment, breathing deeply until you let the pain float out of you.

Some of these techniques are best learned with the help of a professional, and it takes a lot of practice for these techniques to become effective in helping alleviate chronic pain. It is often advisable to work on pain coping strategies for about 30 minutes 3 times a week. With practice you will find that the relaxation and chronic pain control will become stronger and last longer after you are done.

When you become established at using these techniques, you can produce chronic pain relief and relaxation with just a few deep breaths. You can then start to use these techniques while you are engaged in activity, working, talking etc. With enough experience you will begin to feel a greater sense of control over the chronic pain and its effects on your life.