

Mindful Work

Pain management with mindfulness

Pain or body discomfort is very common - 1 in 5 people live with chronic pain, 1 in 3 have a chronic condition, and this is increasing in the population.

Mindfulness can help significantly with pain management - in fact secular mindfulness was developed in the 1970s specifically for this purpose.

The essence of it is to explore your pain with curiosity.

Pain has two distinct components; the physical sensation, and your reaction to it. The latter creates the bigger problem and the mental anguish. Turning away from pain, which is mostly automatic, creates more tension & causes more suffering. The bigger problem is resistance; the response to the pain is worse than the primary unpleasant sensation.

Mental chatter may include storylines such as:

- 'I can't concentrate'
- 'I can't work properly'
- 'My relationship will fail'
- 'I'm frightened it will get worse'

Our relationship with pain often goes through these stages:

1. **Denial** – pushing through it etc – fighting it
 - a. It may seem impossible to get through to the morning, so realise you don't have to - just live one moment at a time. The present is bearable even with the pain
 - b. Know that even if the body is damaged, the mind is still whole, and you are still you.
2. **Bargaining** – making adjustments – but with the underlying hope that the pain will go away
 - a. The healing starts with adjusting your attitude
 - b. Recognise that any fantasy outcome is unreal
3. **Acceptance**
 - a. We begin to turn towards the experience with love, not try to escape it
 - b. We bring this into daily life, not just on the cushion
4. **Flourishing** – staying positive and accepting even as the body deteriorates, and nurturing compassion for self and others, as a result

Mindfulness gives us insight into the resistance, to accept in each moment, to bring curiosity, and allows us to soften. The art is to recognise that there is a choice in how we allow the secondary thoughts to stay or release.

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Key mindfulness practices:

- Turn towards the pain with curiosity and acceptance
- Know that everything is always moving and changing – everything passes
- Explore physical sensation with objective noticing, especially noting the subtle changes
- Practice whole body breathing – be open and soft. Notice that if you clench your hand into a fist, the breathing stops or body is contracted. So breathe into the fist and it naturally opens. Do this with the whole body
- Use the body scan – surrender and breathe out to let go
- Stay connected with the energy of the earth
- Be aware of the story you may be telling yourself. Is it informed by the past, or fantasies for the future? Just keep coming back to now.
- If anxiety is arising, what is causing it? The experience of now, or the future fantasy?
- Do not see the pain seems as a enemy, solid, or dark. You can't fight it, you have to allow it, explore it from the inside. Allow it to become fluid. Rest in the flowing

More on turning towards the pain:

- It's not about staring the pain down; be delicate and gentle, just allowing it to be in your consciousness with tenderness
- Look at the pain microscopically – what is the temperature/flavour/colour/movement etc?
- When one softens – one can see that there's more going on in life
- When we open to pain, we open to pleasure
- Open to a fluid and welcoming perspective – a wide angled view
- Realise that everything is changing, all the time
- Welcome the connection with others in pain, remember that we all suffer, and we all seek relief, it is inevitable in life

The core attitude is to be kind to self and others. Feeling isolated does more harm to your condition than the physical issue, so connecting with others helps (eg Facebook forums).

This is deeply courageous work. Being positive and living with confidence builds slowly, one step at a time. I love this core advice from Vidya Mala Burch:

'When in doubt, breathe out'

'Take a break before you break'

Healing visualisation

We have tremendous capacity to self-heal, both in the body and the mind, which are in any case entirely connected. In every moment our brain is sending messages to every cell in the body, instructing the DNA to create proteins, hormones etc. We can influence what messages, both chemical and energetic, are being communicated to the DNA. This is called epigenetics. The messages are changed by what we think, believe, and feel. Using this incredibly powerful tool may be the most potent form of healing there is.

You can create your own meditation around this, or use my guided visualisation. If you're doing it yourself, I suggest that the meditation goes through these stages :

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- Start with a clear intention to open up a space in time, which is dedicated to healing of self and others
- You can be sitting in a chair upright but relaxed with feet squarely on the floor, or lying down on your back
- Intentionally connect with the energy of the earth beneath you, and the universe above you and all around you
- Close your eyes and bring to mind the space all around you, the space within this room
- Now working through the body , in particular the head and the torso, imagine the body as being mostly empty space , infused with energy (this is accurate ; at an atomic level we are more than 99% space)
- Let the edges of the body soften, so that the energy of the universe around you merges with the energy within the body
- Now imagine yourself in a beautiful place in nature that you know and love
- Bring to mind the physical sensations of sitting on a seat that you know or on the ground, feeling the wind and fresh air on your face, hearing birds and the wind in the trees, being aware of the fragrance of wild flowers - really immerse yourself in the experience of being there as if it is real
- Imagine that your body is completely healed
- How you would move and what sensations do you experience?
- How would you feel? - Elated, blissful, grateful, in love with life, grounded etc?
- Immerse yourself in this feeling, make it real
- As you ease out of the meditation, share the benefit of the practise with all beings

I suggest you do this twice a day for a month, and see what is changing. Change may be gradual or sudden.

Highly recommended books:

'You are not your Pain' - Vidyamala Burch and Danny Penman

'You are the Placebo' – Dr Joe Dispenza

'The Brain's Way of Healing' - Norman Doidge