



Questions and Answers about Mental Techniques for Pain Relief

WHAT ARE MENTAL TECHNIQUES FOR PAIN RELIEF?

Some people can relieve their pain by using mental techniques such as relaxation, imagery, and distraction. You may need the help of health professionals to learn to do these techniques yourself. Friends or family members can help with these techniques also. Mental techniques for pain relief can be useful either with or without pain medicine.

HOW DOES RELAXATION WORK?

Relaxation relieves pain or keeps it from getting worse by reducing tension in the muscles. It can help you fall asleep, give you more energy, make you less tired, reduce your anxiety, and make other pain relief methods work better. Some people, for instance, find that taking a pain medicine or using a cold or hot pack works faster and better when they relax at the same time.

ARE THERE ANY BASIC GUIDELINES FOR USING RELAXATION TECHNIQUES?

The following suggestions may help:

- Understand that your ability to relax may vary from time to time and that relaxation cannot be forced.
- Remember that it may take up to 2 weeks of practice to feel the first results of relaxation.
- Try several relaxation methods until you find one that works for you.
- Stick with the same method so that it becomes easy and routine for you. Use it regularly for at least 5 to 10 minutes twice a day.
- Check for tension throughout the day by noticing tightness in each part of your body from head to foot. Relax any tense muscles. You may use a quick technique such as inhale/tense, exhale/relax, described below.
- If you have any lung problems, check with your doctor before using any relaxation technique that requires deep breathing.

IS THERE ANY SPECIAL POSITION I SHOULD BE IN WHEN I AM DOING RELAXATION EXERCISES?

Relaxation may be done sitting up or lying down. Choose a quiet place whenever possible. Close your eyes. Do not cross your arms and legs because that may cut off circulation and cause numbness or tingling. If you are lying down, be sure you are comfortable. Put a small pillow under your neck and under your knees, or use a low stool to support your lower legs.

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HOW DO I USE RELAXATION?

There are many methods. Here are some for you to try:

Visual Concentration and Rhythmic Massage

- Open your eyes and stare at an object, or close your eyes and think of a peaceful, calm scene.
- With the palm of your hand, massage near the area of pain in a circular, firm manner. Avoid red, raw, swollen, or tender areas. You may wish to ask a family member or friend to do this for you.

Inhale/Tense, Exhale/Relax

- Breathe in (inhale) deeply. At the same time, tense your muscles or a group of muscles. For example, you can squeeze your eyes shut, frown, clench your teeth, make a fist, stiffen your arms and legs, or draw up your arms and legs as tightly as you can.
- Hold your breath and keep your muscles tense for a second or two.
- Let go! Breathe out (exhale) and let your body go limp.

Slow, Rhythmic Breathing

- Stare at an object or close your eyes and concentrate on your breathing or on a peaceful scene.
- Take a slow, deep breath and, as you breathe in, tense your muscles (such as your arms).
- As you breathe out, relax your muscles and feel the tension draining.
- Now remain relaxed and begin breathing slowly and comfortably, concentrating on your breathing, taking about 9 to 12 breaths a minute. Do not breathe too deeply.
- To maintain a slow, even rhythm as you breathe out, you can say silently to yourself, "In, one, two; out, one, two." It may be helpful at first if someone counts out loud for you. If you ever feel out of breath, take a deep breath and then continue the slow breathing exercise. Each time you breathe out, feel yourself relaxing and going limp. If some muscles, such as your shoulders, are not relaxed, tense them as you breathe in and relax them as you breathe out. You need to do this only once or twice for each specific muscle group.
- Continue slow, rhythmic breathing for a few seconds up to 10 minutes, depending on your need.
- To end your slow rhythmic breathing, count silently and slowly from one to three. Open your eyes. Say silently to yourself: "I feel alert and relaxed." Begin moving about slowly.

Other methods you can add to slow rhythmic breathing:

- Imagery
- Listening to slow, familiar music through an earphone or headset

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- Progressive relaxation of body parts: Once you are breathing slowly and comfortably, you may relax different body parts, starting with your feet and working up to your head. Think of words such as limp, heavy, light, warm, or floating. Each time you breathe out, you can focus on a particular area of the body and feel it relaxing. Try to imagine that the tension is draining from that area. For example, as you breathe out, feel your feet and ankles relaxing; the next time you breathe out, feel your calves and knees relaxing and so on, up your body.

Relaxation Tapes

Ask your doctor or nurse to recommend commercially available relaxation tapes. These tape recordings provide step-by-step instructions in relaxation techniques.

WILL I HAVE ANY PROBLEMS WITH USING RELAXATION TECHNIQUES?

Some people who have used relaxation for pain relief have reported the following problems and solutions to them:

- Relaxation may be difficult to use with severe pain. If you have this problem, use a quick and easy relaxation method such as visual concentration with rhythmic massage or breathe in/tense, breathe out/relax.
- You may have a feeling of suffocation. If so, take a deep breath.
- Sometimes breathing too deeply for a while can cause shortness of breath. If this is your problem, take shallow breaths and/or breathe more slowly.
- You may fall asleep. If you do not wish to fall asleep, sit in a hard chair while doing the relaxation exercise or set a timer or alarm.
- You might get feelings of depression or withdrawal. Sometimes being relaxed makes you aware of problems you have been worrying about subconsciously. If this happens, talk to someone who can help you sort out your feelings.

If you have trouble using these methods, ask your doctor or nurse to refer you to a therapist who is experienced in relaxation techniques. Do not continue any relaxation technique that increases your pain, makes you feel uneasy, or causes any unpleasant effects.

WHAT IS BIOFEEDBACK?

With the help of special machines, people can learn to control certain body functions such as heart rate, blood pressure, and muscle tension. Biofeedback is sometimes used to help people learn to relax. Cancer patients can use biofeedback techniques to reduce anxiety and help them cope with their pain. Biofeedback usually is used with other pain-relief methods.

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WHAT IS IMAGERY, AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

Imagery is using your imagination to create mental pictures or situations. The way imagery relieves pain is not completely understood. Imagery can be thought of as a deliberate daydream that uses all of your senses—sight, touch, hearing, smell, and taste. Some people believe that imagery is a form of self-hypnosis.

Certain images may reduce your pain both during imagery and for hours afterward. If you must stay in bed or can't go out of the house, you may find that imagery helps reduce the closed-in feeling; you can imagine and revisit favorite spots in your mind. Imagery can help you relax, relieve boredom, decrease anxiety, and help you sleep.

HOW DO I USE THE TECHNIQUE OF IMAGERY?

Usually, imagery for pain relief is done with the eyes closed. A relaxation technique may be used first. The image can be something such as a ball of healing energy or a picture drawn in your mind of yourself as a person without pain. (For example, imagine that you are cutting wires that transmit pain signals from each part of your body to your brain.)

Here is an exercise with the first image—the ball of energy:¹

- Close your eyes. Breathe slowly and feel yourself relax.
- Concentrate on your breathing. Breathe slowly and comfortably from your abdomen. As you breathe in, say silently and slowly to yourself, “In, one, two.” As you breathe out, say, “Out, one, two.” Breathe in this slow rhythm for a few minutes.
- Imagine a ball of healing energy forming in your lungs or on your chest. It may be like a white light. It can be vague. It does not have to be vivid. Imagine this ball forming, taking shape.
- When you are ready, imagine that the air you breathe in blows this healing ball of energy to the area of your pain. Once there, the ball heals and relaxes you.
- When you breathe out, imagine the air blows the ball away from your body. As it goes, the ball takes your pain with it. (Be careful: do not blow as you breathe out; breathe out naturally.)
- Repeat the last two steps each time you breathe in and out.
- You may imagine that the ball gets bigger and bigger as it takes more and more discomfort away from your body.
- To end the imagery, count slowly to three, breathe in deeply, open your eyes, and say silently to yourself, “I feel alert and relaxed.” Begin moving about slowly.

ARE THERE ANY PROBLEMS WITH USING IMAGERY?

The problems are similar to the ones that may occur with relaxation techniques.

¹It is a variation of the pain technique credited to Dr. David Bresler at the Pain Control Unit, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

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WHAT IS DISTRACTION, AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

Distraction means turning your attention to something other than the pain. Many people use this method without realizing it when they watch television or listen to the radio to “take their minds off” the pain.

Distraction may work better than medicine if pain is sudden and intense or if it is brief, lasting only 5 to 45 minutes. Distraction is useful when you are waiting for pain medicine to start working. If pain is mild, you may be able to distract yourself for hours.

Some people think that a person who can be distracted from pain does not have severe pain. This is not necessarily true. Distraction can be a powerful way of temporarily relieving even the most intense pain.

HOW CAN I USE DISTRACTION?

Any activity that occupies your attention can be used for distraction. If you enjoy working with your hands, crafts such as needlework, model building, or painting may be useful. Losing yourself in a good book might divert your mind from the pain. Going to a movie or watching television are also good distraction methods. Slow, rhythmic breathing can be used for distraction as well as relaxation.

You may find it helpful to listen to rather fast music through a headset or earphones. To help keep your attention on the music, tap out the rhythm. You can adjust the volume to match the intensity of pain, making it louder for very severe pain. This technique does not require much energy, so it may be very useful when you are tired.

ARE THERE ANY DRAWBACKS TO USING DISTRACTION FOR PAIN RELIEF?

After using a distraction technique, some people report that they are tired, irritable, and feel more pain. Some also find that other people do not believe they are in pain if distraction provides pain relief. If these are problems for you, you may not wish to use distraction, or you may simply be careful about which distraction methods you use and when you use them.

Notes: