



Pain Management Info Session 2: Relaxation

This information sheet summarises the key information presented during the Pain Management Information session 2 at the Ipswich Hospital Pain Management Unit.

When we feel stressed, worried, anxious, angry, frustrated, low or irritable, we experience a release of hormones which open the pain gates and increase the intensity of pain. These emotions can also lead to an increase in muscle tension as our bodies respond, which adds to the high muscle tension which results from long-term pain; this muscle tension can in turn contribute to increased levels of pain. Learning relaxation can help combat the negative effects of these difficult emotions and muscle tension on us and our pain levels.

The role of emotions in how we feel pain

Our bodies and brains have evolved in a way that means that when we feel stressed, worried, anxious, angry, frustrated or low, our bodies are programmed to respond to the circumstances which made us feel that way.

To do this, chemicals and hormones are released in our bodies. Whilst these help us respond, they also act on the pain system in an unhelpful way; they open the pain gates so increase our pain levels.

Our bodies also respond to some of these difficult emotions (particularly stress and anxiety) by increasing muscle tension. Increased muscle tension can contribute to increased pain, as tight, tense muscles tend to ache and burn.

On the other hand, when we are feeling relaxed, happy and at ease, the chemicals and hormones which are released in response to these emotions close the pain gates so decrease pain levels. Our muscle tension also tends to be lower when we are more relaxed, which helps lower pain levels too.

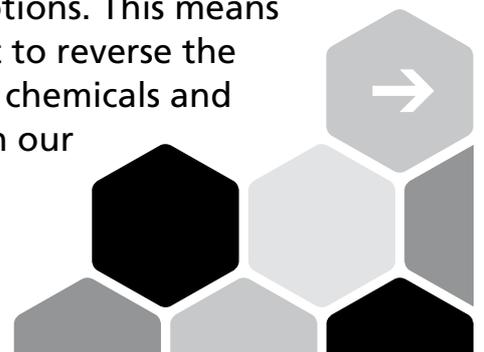
Pain leads to muscle tension

Increased muscle tension as a result of emotions can add to the increased muscle tone which people experience when they live with long-term pain.

Our body's automatic response to pain is to protect us by switching on the large muscles around our joints. This can be helpful in protecting a joint after an acute injury, but it is unhelpful when the pain is chronic as it causes several painful changes in our bodies: muscles start to ache, joints stiffen and circulation slows. These can add to pre-existing pain, and cause previously pain-free areas to hurt.

How can relaxation help?

Learning to use a relaxation technique can be very helpful. Using a relaxation technique helps to calm us and soothe difficult emotions. This means that we start to reverse the effect of the chemicals and hormones on our pain system.



As we relax, the pain gates move to a more closed position, and pain reduces.

Relaxation also causes the tight, tense muscles which result from emotions and long-term pain to lower their tone and release their tension. The result is muscles are eased, and mentally we feel calmer, clearer-headed and more in control.

Using a relaxation technique does not have to be complicated or time consuming. Some of the most effective techniques are quick and easy, meaning we can use them throughout the day to calm us and release muscle tension. There are many different relaxation techniques, but a simple and effective one to start with is 'stop and flop'.

'Stop and flop' relaxation technique

- As often as possible during the day, pause and tune into what your body is doing and how you are feeling. Are your muscles tense? Try to notice whether you're feeling stressed, tense or annoyed.
- Stop and Flop! Breathe out slowly and deeply. Let your shoulders and arms relax their tension. Imagine the tension draining away from your body. Close your eyes if you like.
- Think to yourself 'stay calm'. Notice the feeling of being relaxed for a moment.

Use this technique regularly throughout the day to help combat a build-up of stress, pressure and muscle tension.

Relaxation is a skill which improves with practice; the more regularly you use it, the more effective it will be. Use this skill for managing stress and pain.

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Key points about relaxation

- Despite being very simple to do, relaxation techniques act on the nervous system in a complex way.
 - They help lower levels of muscle tension, stress and pain.
 - Doing a relaxation exercise regularly means it becomes more effective and easier to do.
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My personal goal in relaxation is:

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