Chronic Pain and Negative Emotions: How the Five Senses Can Help

by ERIN SCOTT

Chronic Pain and Emotions

Constant pain has a way of disturbing your mind and soul's peace and undeniably affects our emotions negatively.

It is an unfortunate reality that living with chronic pain can lead to anger, depression, resentment, anxiety, and other negative feelings. A study in 2011 compared 15 healthy males and 15 males who had lower back pain, showed that the men with pain scored higher for negative emotions than the healthy control subjects.

Why Does Pain Cause Negative Emotions?

There are many reasons why chronic pain might lead to our peace being disturbed and negative emotions piling up.

First of all is the pain itself. It is tough to deal with it forcing itself into your day, into your thoughts, into your dreams.

In fact, brain scans have shown that people with chronic pain have altered brain structures. How it might change, will depend on your particular condition, but the areas affected typically deal with the sensory system. It is also interesting to note that some of the affected areas are also involved in regulating emotions. This might help explain why there is such a strong link between chronic pain and our emotions.

Additionally, many other challenges come with being disabled and in pain.

Chronic pain and mobility issues might mean that you aren't able to get out and see people as much as you'd like to. Isolation can hurt just as much as joints or muscles.

Lifestyle changes and dealing with social pressures can also add up.

When these things combine, it is understandable that you might have issues with being upset, anxious, and not at peace.

What Does This Mean For Our Pain?

When our stress levels rise, we feel anxious, depressed, or unhappy, and it affects our pain levels.

Because some of the same areas of the brain that drive our pain, also drive our emotions, if we are upset, it could trigger a flare, and cause more pain.

That isn't to say that there aren't real physiological reasons for the pain as well, just that our emotions are part of

the cycle of chronic pain.

If pain causes negative emotions, and negative emotions, in turn, causes pain, then the question becomes, how do we work on bringing more peace back into our lives to interrupt this cycle?

The Five Senses

An easy way to address these negative feelings is to try and tackle them through positive stimuli through our five senses.

That way, instead of overwhelming our sensory system with negative input, we can engage it with things that we find pleasant instead.

It is also an easy trick to remember!

Touch

Some pain conditions might make you hypersensitive to certain physical sensations. Consider your condition, and think what things you can touch which are pleasant to you.

Perhaps you enjoy the feeling of particular clothing, or you find heat soothing and calming. Squeezing a ball or fidgeting with something can also be great as you can carry those things around with you in case you need stress relief when you are out and about.

There are unlimited options, such as working with art and craft materials, and even sitting outside in the sunshine, if you enjoy that!

Smell

Scents are very linked to our emotions and memories. Surrounding ourselves with ones that we like will help put us in a good mood.

If you are sensitive to specific scents, then you need to be careful about avoiding those, but otherwise, if there are others that you can safely enjoy, then you should.

For example, you could try a nice bath bomb, scented oil diffuser or necklace, or if you are a baker, bake something to capture that lovely smell of fresh baked goods.

Taste

Eating something tasty can have an undeniably positive effect on our mood.

There are unlimited options for yummy treats! Even if you have a special diet, there is bound to be something that you can have that makes you feel happy.

Just be sure that you aren’t reaching for the chocolate and sweets too often, and building unhealthy habits.

Hearing

Listening to something fun or soothing is a great way to put you into a different space mentally.

Most people think about music when they think about things to listen to. Depending on what your tastes are, what mood you are in, there are lots of musical options for your listening pleasure.

Outside of music, there are also podcasts and audiobooks. You can find books and podcasts on a huge variety of

subjects and genres.

The best part about music, audiobooks, and podcasts, is that they are portable. Load them up on your phone or a portable listening device, and make sure you have some headphones. Then just pop them on whenever you need to escape.

Sight

When things are overwhelming, figure out what makes you happy to look at.

Perhaps you like pictures of animals, beaches, forests, family, or funny memes. A great way to collect these to look at is on Pinterest or Instagram, or even just on your phone. Then, you can look at them when you are feeling upset or anxious.

Additionally, look around your surroundings and consider changing the décor to make you feel more at peace.

Your Toolbox is Full

The suggestions given are flexible, and many can be used wherever you are. Use your five senses as tools to help you calm down, make you smile, and invite more peace into your life.