Can Meditating Reduce Chronic Pain?

by KATARINA ZULAK

Meditation for Chronic Pain

Meditation is a way to practice being present. According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, a pioneer in the field of meditation and medicine, meditation is a practice of cultivating mindfulness. Meditation for chronic pain might also be used.

In the morning, after I finish getting ready for the day, I set aside 10 to 15 minutes to meditate. I turn the sound off on all my devices to disconnect for this period of time. I set a timer using a meditation app, which uses the sound of bells to tell me when the meditation is over. Then, I sit and close my eyes (I use a chair rather than sitting cross-legged on the floor because that would be too painful for me).

I focus my attention on the natural rhythm of my breathing. This means noticing the sensations I feel from the rise and fall of my abdomen with each breath or from the inflow and outflow of air through my nostrils. Inevitably, my mind becomes distracted by worries, thoughts, memories or plans. When I recognize my mind is caught up in these things, I gently guide my awareness back to my breath. I do this until the bell rings.

And that's it! The practice I described is called a mindful breathing meditation. Other meditation practices invite you to focus your awareness on body sensations (body scan meditation), sounds, thoughts or feelings and movement (ta chi or yoga for chronic pain relief).

Meditation and Changing Your Mindset for Chronic Pain

Many people want to be more present but have trouble making it a habit. Meditation helps train the mind to sustain our attention in the here and now. This takes practice, just like anything else! It also helps us learn to recognize when our mind wanders off. How can learning to be more present benefit you?

Much of our anxiety comes from worrying about the future or reliving difficult moments from the past, rather than from anything going on directly in front of us at this moment in time. Learning to be present can help reduce stress and anxiety. As my grandma used to say, "Worry about crossing that bridge when you get there!"

Between spending time on your phone or binge-watching Netflix, it is easy to become too distracted to enjoy the small moments in life. Meditation can help us relearn to stop and smell the roses. This is especially important for people living with chronic pain. Even during pain flares there are small moments of enjoyment if we stop and notice them — the taste of a good meal, sharing a hug, a sunny day or a favorite hobby. Intentionally taking in the good moments by staying present while experiencing them is a powerful way to counterbalance the negative experience of feeling pain.

Mindfulness meditation teachers often compare thoughts and feelings to the weather. The weather constantly changes. Even the worst storms pass and the sun comes out again. To use another time-honored expression, meditating helps us remember that this too shall pass. As you meditate, you notice that thoughts and feelings pop into your mind, only to fade away. Overtime, you realize that what you feel, or what your mind is preoccupied with,

changes significantly from day to day.

Knowing this can help you to feel calmer in the face of difficult emotions or challenging situations. Since feelings change, meditation teaches that feelings are not the truth of things. For example, feeling sad does not mean that the world is always a sad place or that you are always a sad person. Developing a greater sense of equanimity through meditation can help you handle the difficulties of living with chronic pain.

Finally, a core part of meditation is learning to be mindful in a non-judgemental way. Initially, I was very judgmental of myself when I started meditating because my mind could not stay focused on my breath for very long. Over and over I would notice that my attention had wandered off and I would have to refocus on the present. Eventually, I realized this was a crucial learning opportunity.

As renowned meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg explains, "The invitation to begin again (and again and again) that meditation affords is an invitation to the practice of self-compassion— to heal through letting go rather than harming ourselves with cycles of self-doubt, judgment, and criticism."

As you can see from the example above, I learned something about how I treat myself because of meditation. When you pay attention to the type of thoughts that pop into your head, you learn about patterns of negative self-talk. This self-knowledge is powerful. When your inner critic gets on their soap box, you can learn to say to yourself "Oh, here I go again, criticizing myself." Take a deep breath, and let it go.

Does Science Support Meditation for Pain Management?

In a word, yes. The Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program created by Jon Kabat-Zinn demonstrated remarkable benefits for reducing chronic pain and depression. I personally have found that this approach has helped me to reduce my anxiety, improve my quality of life and manage my pain.

Researchers investigated the effect of MBSR programs for participants with mixed chronic pain conditions and the significance of at-home practice for chronic pain management. The study measured results in terms of bodily pain, quality of life and psychological symptoms for each chronic pain condition (neck/back pain, arthritis, fibromyalgia, chronic headache and two or more coexisting conditions). The researchers discovered that the degree of benefit of participating in mindfulness programs varied depending on the chronic pain condition but that overall improvements were seen in almost every category.

Similar results were found in a study of the effects of participating in an MBSR course for people with fibromyalgia. Significantly, the researchers interviewed about half of the original participants from the mindfulness training group three years later and found sustained long-term benefits among those who continued their mindfulness practice.

How to Meditate

There are different types of meditation and different ways to go about it. One type may work for some people but not for you, so make sure you research and experiment with your options so you find the right mode for you.

For the sake of this article, we will discuss the most common type: concentration meditation. This is when you focus on something while being mindful; it is usually your breath.

Here are some beginner steps:

- Find a comfortable location, whether you are laying in bed or sitting on your couch.
- Close your eyes.
- Breathe naturally but deeply, and focus on your inhale and exhale.
- As you breathe, feel the movements as your chest goes up and down and take note of any other bodily sensations.

In Conclusion

If you want to incorporate meditation into your pain management routine, we recommend you stay on it consistently, choosing one time of day to practice it. It might feel uncomfortable at first, but the more you do it, the more natural it will feel.