10 Ways to Manage Stress and Chronic Pain

by RYAN RANKIN

How to Cope With Stress and Chronic Pain

Nowadays, stress can come in all shapes and sizes, whether it is work, family, finances or even cheering for your favorite sports team as a close game is determined in the final seconds. When it comes to stress brought on from dealing with chronic pain, that is when stress levels are taken to an entirely different level. For those who do not suffer from an invisible illness, coping with this additional stress and chronic pain can be hard to understand. But for people dealing with one of the many types of chronic pain, navigating this added stress can feel like you are riding an emotional rollercoaster.

I suffer from early-onset osteoarthritis (OA) in my right ankle. After two major surgeries, I have limited range of motion and a constantly swollen ankle joint. The pain comes and goes, and I wear an Arizona brace to help manage the OA. But when the pain flares-up, my stress levels can go through the roof.

Over the years I have experimented with a variety of tools to better cope with the stress. While many of them didn't work for me, a few have. Here are 10 tools that can be useful when coping with stress brought on by chronic pain.

1. Meditation

Taking a moment each day to quiet your mind can make a huge difference in learning how to manage stress levels. The good thing about meditation for chronic pain is that it can be done sitting on the couch, lying down or just about anywhere. The only thing needed is a quiet place for the mind to relax.

Two common types of mediation for chronic pain are:

- **Mindfulness meditation.** This is done sitting down, eyes closed, with your back straight. The focus is on breathing in and out in a relaxing, even pace.
- **Transcendental meditation.** This is done while a person sits in a comfortable position, eyes closed, and silently repeats a mantra, which is a particular sound or short phrase such as "I am strong."

2. Create a Daily Routine

Creating a daily routine doesn't in itself take away the pain or stress, but on the days when pain flare-ups cause more stress, having a routine can simplify the day and remove any unexpected situations that may add to an already stressful day.

Here's an example of what a daily routine could look like:

- **6:30 a.m.:** Wake up.
- **6:45 a.m. to 7:15 a.m.:** Light stretching and exercises.

- **7:15 a.m.:** Get ready for work.
- **9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.:** Work.
- **6:00 p.m.:** Dinner.
- **7:00 p.m.:** Spending time with family or friends.
- **8:00 p.m. to 8:15 p.m.:** Meditate.
- **8:30 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.:** Reading and journaling.
- **10:00 p.m.:** Bed.

3. Low-Impact Exercise

Exercising can be hard to do when chronic pain really acts up, but doing some form of exercising can help manage stress in the long-term. Even on the worst days, setting a small goal of walking up five stairs can help your mind cope with the emotional rollercoaster caused by chronic pain.

The types of exercises will depend on the type of chronic pain you have. Typically, swimming in a warm pool is considered the best option because floating in water takes pressure off the joints. Other common exercises are yoga, walking, stretching and strength training.

Exercises to be avoided include running, jumping and other high-impact movements.

4. Find a Support Group

Finding people who suffer from chronic pain is a great way to talk about how the pain is affecting your life. Hearing from others who are in the same boat as you can be comforting.

A support group can be face-to-face or even online. There are a lot of great online resources to find people wanting to learn how to better manage chronic pain that offer a wide range of support.

A quick Google search for support groups for chronic pain is an easy place to begin. As more research into support groups is done, you will be able to find groups that focus on the type of pain you have and provide additional resources to help with coping.

5. Join a Self-Management Pain Program

A self-management pain program is designed to work with existing treatments, and hopefully enhance their results. The focus of self-management pain programs is to help individuals better coordinate the aspects of their lives affected by chronic pain and to help them keep their lives as active as possible.

In addition to those mentioned above, other topics can include effective communication with family and health care professionals, proper nutrition, exercise tips and balancing a busy life with limitations brought on by chronic pain.

There is no surefire way of reducing stress brought on by chronic pain. Having the tools to be better equipped to cope with increased stress levels can mean the difference between an okay day and a terrible one. While it may seem that increases in chronic pain and stress go hand in hand, being able to better reduce the stress through the tools mentioned above can allow for more focus on properly managing chronic pain.

6. Animal Companionship

If I were going to name the reasons why I love the company of my cat, Sara, I would list her affection, her funny antics and her general adorableness. But it turns out that spending time with her is also useful for my health.

Specifically, animal companionship can reduce pain, lower stress and improve mood in people with chronic pain. These benefits are experienced not only by pet parents but by anyone who spends time with an animal.

If adopting a cat or dog is not feasible for you, consider regularly visiting a friend or family member's pet. You can also talk with your doctor about clinics or organizations that provide therapy dog visits — even a couple of short sessions per week can make a difference!

7. Spend Time in Nature

Getting out into nature lowers stress levels and boosts mood. It can help you to get out of your head, stop ruminating about our worries and pay attention to the here and now.

One study showed that walking in a forest can lower blood pressure and reduce levels of the stress hormone, cortisol. You don't have to be able to hike to enjoy nature. As long as you are in a natural setting, sitting on a bench, enjoying a picnic or lying back with the car doors open, you are able to enjoy the benefits of relaxing outside.

Recently, I researched accessible parks and paths in my area and have been able to spend several lovely afternoons relaxing in nature. I always feel better for several days afterward!

8. Listen to Music

Listening to music is a powerful way to de-stress. Music directly impacts our feelings via the unique effect it has on the functioning of our brains and bodies.

Research has demonstrated that listening to music, particularly calming classical music, causes lower blood pressure, reduced heart rate and a drop in stress hormones. Music acts as a positive distraction, while also anchoring us in the present moment.

The benefits don't stop there. Tuning in for an hour a day has been found to reduce pain and depression by up to a quarter. In this study, it did not matter whether participants listened to their favorite relaxing music or music chosen by researchers. I've found that listening to music when I'm having trouble sleeping or experiencing a lot of fatigue is very renewing.

9. Try Probiotics

Could the way to mental health be through your stomach? An emerging field of research has found links between probiotics (the healthful bacteria that live in the digestive tract) in the gut and brain function. Some probiotics produce neurotransmitters, which are chemicals that regulate the nervous system and affect mood.

When probiotics secrete neurotransmitters in the digestive tract, they may trigger the complex nerve network in the gut to signal the brain in a way that positively affects emotions.

In some studies, specific probiotics have been shown to reduce stress, anxiety and depression, including lactobacillus acidophilus and bifidobacterium bifidum. Probiotics can be taken as a supplement or eaten in fermented foods like yogurt, kefir, kombucha, miso and kimchi.

10. Laugh

We've all heard that laughter is the best medicine, but we feel stressed it can be hard to find the humor in things.

However, laughter is one of the best antidotes for stress and anxiety. Just 5 or 10 minutes can reduce muscle tension, increase endorphin levels, lower blood pressure and regulate levels of stress hormone cortisol.

Rather than hoping something funny will happen on a stressful day, take advantage of the benefits of laughter by watching your favorite comedy show, sitcom or comedian. I find it hard to stay in a bad mood after watching late night TV, and who doesn't love being able to say that you have to watch another episode of your favorite sitcom

because it is good for your mental health?