

57 ways to ease your pain: Ouch! Pain gets your attention, but what's it saying? Here's a lesson in the language of pain, translated into simple, effective remedies

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The problem with pain isn't just that it hurts a whole lot. Trained to ignore or medicate our aches away, we're missing the significant messages that those jabbing jolts may be sending. When that happens, our ability to understand and manage pain is compromised, and so is our well-being.

"Acute pain is important because it's a signal sent by the peripheral nervous system to the brain to say 'something's not right,'" Says Michel Dubois, M.D., director of the New York University Pain Center in New York City. "It's the alarm sounded by the body's preservation system, and without it, we'd never know when we are in danger."

Learning how to decipher these signals is the key to successful pain management.

The techniques listed here may help drain away certain types of pain--but they might work even better if you've practiced them before you start hurting, says Michel Dubois, M.D.

Massage

can interfere with a pain signal's pathway to your brain because the manipulated skin sends other impulses along the same pathways. Massage is a great, way to release tension, which can build up in the muscles and cause a decrease in circulation and nutrient delivery to tissues, two factors that prolong and increase pain. Manipulation of the soft tissue decreases muscular tension, boosts the removal of metabolic waste and promotes nutrient delivery to healing tissue--all important components of pain reduction, says Portland-based naturopathic physician and acupuncturist Rick Marinelli.

Hypnosis

can alter your level of awareness and focus your attention away from your pain, and introduce suggestions such as seeing pain in a positive way.

Guided imagery

teaches you to focus your mind on pleasant colors or images in order to change the way your body senses and responds to pain.

Deep Breathing

from the diaphragm honors the body's natural rhythm and facilitates a return to homeostasis.

Acupuncture

employs thin needles placed into points on your body's meridians, the paths through which energy and life forces are believed to run. It may help interrupt the transmission of pain signals.

Biofeedback

allows patients to monitor their own anxiety or muscle tension, enabling them to retrain their reactions and induce relaxation.

Hydrotherapy

is a gentle water exercise program that can strengthen uninjured muscles and decrease the inflammation of those that are hurt and swollen.

Physical Therapy

is commonly used to stretch muscles and make them stronger around the injured area.

Posture Work

and movement retraining show people how to use muscles according to their intended pattern.

Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulation

employs a pocket-sized battery-powered device that attaches to the skin and sends safe, gentle electrical signals to control pain.

Of course, controlling pain is important, too. Appetite, quality of sleep and energy levels are all affected if we're in pain. But the more we know about our distress, the better we can address it.

Physical pain is the most common reason for doctor appointments in the United States; it accounts for 140 million visits and \$100 billion each year in healthcare costs. According to the American Pain Foundation, more than 50 million of us suffer with persistent pain.

Unfortunately, we tend to treat the symptoms, not the source. "We've been trained to believe that pain needs to be suppressed, period," says Scott Denny, Ph.D., D.C., a chiropractic and acupuncture physician in Miramar, Fla. "We need to learn to determine what pain is about. You can't do that if it's been buried under multiple prescriptions and has now become a chronic condition."

The first step in deciphering your body's message is to determine what type of pain you're experiencing. Acute pain has a known cause, such as kidney stones, childbirth or a paper cut, and resolves quickly after that cause is gone. Chronic benign pain persists for months or years and is often caused by a damaged nervous system; this might include long-standing back pain, headaches or the joint- and soft-tissue distress of fibromyalgia.

Denny suggests keeping a pain diary, which describes your discomfort in detail: when you feel it, how bad it hurts, what you were doing when it occurred and what type of medication you took to control it. All this can reveal patterns and contributing factors that are helpful to your healthcare providers. (See "Describing Your Pain," page 107.)

For patients who have trouble putting pain into words, use the letters P-Q-R-S-T as an easy-to-remember guide, suggests Rick Marinelli, N.D., clinical professor at the National College of Naturopathic Medicine and faculty member of the American Academy of Pain Management in Sonora, Calif. The P stands for the pain type; Q is for its quality or characteristics; R is for the region of occurrence; S stands for severity; and T means timing--when and how often.

How Does It Stop?

Once you've learned the language of pain, it's time to find the right way to ease it. "I think the multidisciplinary approach to pain management is really the best," Denny says. "Pain is a problem with many factors, and it needs to be addressed in several different ways."