

STRESS, RELAXATION AND PAIN

Information for you

A little bit more information about pain.

Adrenaline is a powerful hormone that is designed to help us when we are in danger. It makes us more alert, our hearts pump a bit faster and it gets more blood to our muscles. If you've ever woken up and thought a burglar was downstairs or had to give a big talk at work, your adrenaline levels will have gone up. They normally return to normal once the stressful situation has gone.

Adrenaline is helpful in short bursts like this but when it's high all the time it causes problems.

Having pain is stressful. People with chronic pain tell us that they worry about all sorts of things, including what is causing their pain, if the pain will stop, money, work, and relationships. Their adrenaline levels tend to be high, and this 'winds-up' the pain system, producing extra pain messages. The muscles in their body become tensed and this can make the pain worse.

Stress also causes our body to produce a hormone called cortisol. It causes problems such as low mood, poor memory and a decreased ability to fight infection. This is why many people with chronic pain find difficulty concentrating or have frequent colds.

The good news is that our body also produces feel good chemicals called endorphins. They are our body's own painkillers, and can make us feel better and improve our mood. Relaxation can increase the level of endorphins in the body, reducing pain naturally.

Now we know a little bit more about why stress can magnify pain, this may help you see why it might be useful to try some relaxation.

Relaxation

There are many approaches to relaxation. It could be reading a book or listening to music.

Relaxation needs to be practiced daily. It takes time to learn. Some people find it easier than others but the more you practice, the better you will get. Try to plan times for regular relaxation and find a quiet comfortable place where you won't be disturbed. Choose a time of day when you do not feel pressured to do anything else.

A key part of relaxation is relaxed breathing.

Tummy Breathing / Diaphragmatic Breathing

- Find a comfortable space, e.g. lying on your bed or a recliner chair.
- Let your shoulders drop.
- Place your hands on your stomach, just below your rib cage.
- To start with, concentrate on your breathing for a few minutes. Breathe slowly and calmly.
- When you breathe **IN** your tummy should move **OUT** a little because the air filling your lungs pushes down on the top of your stomach
- When you breathe **OUT** your tummy should fall **IN** slightly as your lungs empty leaving more room for your stomach.

***The easy way to remember this is
Breathe in, tummy out – Breathe out, tummy in***

Many people with chronic pain have said that relaxation and diaphragmatic breathing are useful techniques to help manage their pain.

Once you have mastered diaphragmatic breathing, you can practice in all sorts of places - sitting in the bus, waiting for sleep, and in stressful situations.

For more information:

- www.chronicpainscotland.org
- www.nhsinform.co.uk/msk

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