



Support Group Leader Training – Section 3-Lesson 2

Subject: Meditation for Pain Management

Chronic pains are pretty common, with studies showing that at least 20% of people globally are living with chronic pain. That is a significant number.

Chronic pain is a condition that continues or recurs for more than 3 to 6 months. Even if it is not severe, such prolonged pain may cause significant discomfort. Moreover, studies show that about 8% of adults with chronic pain have severe pain.

Another worrying thing is the rising prevalence of chronic pain. Just a few decades back, less than five percent of adults used to have chronic pain. However, its prevalence has risen by more than four times in just a few decades.

Doctors often treat chronic pain with various medications causing severe side effects. In addition, chronic pain is associated with opioid abuse, anxiety, and depression.

Meditation or mindfulness is one of the safer ways to manage these conditions. It is safe because it does not involve the use of any substances. Instead, it is more about reprogramming the mind and thus improving physical health.

One of the challenges for managing chronic pain is that there are many different types and causes. Thus, some may have headaches and others could have chronic low back pain. Arthritis, neuropathic pains, and psychogenic pains are not rare.

There has been an increasing prevalence of conditions like fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome.

Thus, the higher prevalence of these conditions only underlines the importance of reprogramming the brain, altering behaviour, and changing thought patterns. Meditation may help achieve all these objectives.

What is meditation?

In recent years, many research organizations have started to study meditation, how it works, and the best way to meditate.

Meditation is an eastern practice traditionally popular in countries like India, China, and some other parts of Eastern Asia.

Meditation helps relax the mind and body, increases calmness, improves psychological balance, helps cope with stress, illness, and painful conditions. It helps both with physical and psychogenic pain.

A national health survey of 2017 in the US shows that meditation and other mindfulness techniques are gaining popularity. This is because people realize the health risks posed by medications, opioids, and other substances.

Moreover, substance use only provides temporary and unsatisfactory relief. Thus, studies show that the practice of meditation increased three-fold from 2012 to 2017.

Meditation is about focusing your attention on the present moment and avoiding other thoughts. It may also involve focusing on something like respiration or even a specific sound. This prevents the mind from wandering, which helps calm down and reprogram the brain.

How does meditation work?

As the popularity of meditation increases, so have the efforts to understand the underlying mechanism.

Induces changes in brain structure

One of the proposed ways meditations may help is through modification in various brain structures like the sensory cortex, hippocampus, memory processes, and other brain regions.

These brain regions participate in different mental and physical processes, so it has a broad range of benefits.

These changes occur with prolonged and regular practice of meditation. However, these changes may even be visible on imaging. For example, one study showed that regular meditation could increase hippocampal volume and even cortical thickness.

Improved functionality of brain function

This is visible through more complex testing. Meditation may cause functional changes in the brain due to the rewiring of neurons or changes in neurotransmitters levels. Thus, meditation may result in improved attention and memory.

Meditation may help enhance autonomic nerve function

This results in reduced heart rate, improved control over blood pressure, and improved digestive health. Many of the effects of meditation on health occur due to changes in the autonomic nervous system and resulting changes in the working of internal organs.

There is strong evidence that this is possible. For example, studies in Tibetan Buddhists have confirmed their ability to control heart rate and even regulate the body's temperature.

Lowers inflammation

Meditation and mindfulness may help regulate chronic inflammation, which is the cause of many chronic conditions. For example, this low-grade inflammation causes fibromyalgia and chronic fatigue syndrome. Studies show that meditation may lower the levels of IL-6 and TNF-alpha, thus reducing inflammation.

Helps overcome pain and other unpleasant feelings

Evidence is increasing that meditation may help reduce pain sensation and help overcome other unpleasant feelings.

Types of meditation

The good thing about meditation is that it is pretty straightforward to practice and needs minimal supervision. There are many ways of practicing meditation, which we discuss below.

Visualization meditation

This is a common technique that many people use without even realizing that it is one of the types of meditation. Guided imagery or visualization involves imagining or visualizing pleasant or positive things. For example, a person living with pain may visualize having pain free and happy time at some beautiful place. One may even imagine some pleasant old experiences. This allows the body to rest, resulting in better pain control

Mindfulness meditation

Mindfulness meditation focuses on thoughts that pass the mind but without altering them or judging them. It is like just being an observer. It is often combined with other techniques like focusing on breathing and other body sensations.

Spiritual meditation

This is one of the oldest forms of medicine. Many people have been practicing it without knowing it. One can sit in a calm place at home and repeat prayers with their eyes closed.

Focused meditation

This is about focusing on something and thus preventing the mind from wandering. One may focus on their breath, stare at a candle flame, count breathe, stare at the moon. Most people know the relaxing effect of these activities, and many have practiced it without knowing it is also a form of meditation.

Body scanning

As the name says, this is about focusing on every part of the body. Therefore, one may start from the toe and scan every aspect of their body, thus helping all muscles to relax. It is better done lying, though one can also do it when sitting in a relaxed pose. Many guiding audios are available online to help with this kind of meditation.

Movement meditation

Most people imagine meditation as sitting in a lotus position and concentrating on something. However, that is not always true. One can also meditate in other ways like walking alone, gardening, and practicing yoga or tai chi. These active forms of meditation may be better for many people who find peace in some physical activity.

Mantra meditation

This type of meditation is commonly practiced in Hinduism or Buddhism. It is a meditation in which one focuses on a specific mantra or chant that might be recited loudly or quietly. However, one does not essentially need to use a mantra, as you may also recite some prayer, only making sure that it is short and contains only a few words.

When it comes to meditation, the possibilities are endless.

Can meditation help manage chronic pain?

Yes, there is enough evidence from traditional experience and clinical trials that meditation can help with chronic pains. However, it may be more effective for some and less for others.

- A study in eighty-eight patients living with chronic back pain found that meditation could help significantly lower the back pain after eight sessions.
- Another randomized controlled trial in 40 people living with multiple sclerosis found that meditation could significantly help reduce chronic pain and improve quality of life.
- A meta-analysis of seven clinical trials with 864 participants found that meditation could help significantly lower pain scores in those living with low back pain.
- Another study in 2019 found that you do not need much experience to practice meditation, and it can even help those with no prior experience of meditation.

These are just a few studies. However, many more studies support the use of meditation for chronic pain relief.

How to use meditation for pain management

People can use any of the meditation techniques mentioned above, from spiritual meditation to body scanning. However, for many, the question may be how to start practicing meditation. Here it is vital to understand that practicing meditation needs minimum guidance. Thus, some of the ways of starting are to buy books, download meditation apps, watch online videos.

However, for some, attending classes, at least, initially may help. There are many personal instructors, too. The only thing to remember is that one should not focus on pain when meditating and instead focus away from it. It is about altering brain wiring.

Thus, guided imagery or focusing on pleasant thoughts may help. It is vital to ignore the pain, and the time will come when a person will start experiencing less pain.

Benefits of using meditation for pain management

Meditation is a better choice for chronic pains. Just consider the fact that the opioid epidemic is now a severe problem in the US, with prescription drugs causing more deaths than illicit drugs.

Most of these are people who started taking opioids to get rid of their chronic pain. Unfortunately, this is an example of when medicine turned out to be more dangerous and even fatal compared to the disease. Meditation is entirely safe, with no known side effects. Even if it does not help adequately in chronic pain, it has many other benefits like reduced stress and anxiety, improved focus and memory, and better quality of life.

People who meditate regularly undergo significant behavioural changes. As a result, they start looking at life quite differently. As a result, they become more satisfied with life in the long run.

Conclusion

Chronic pain is a significant problem. Doctors often try to help by prescribing pain killers, antiseizure drugs, anti-depressants, and even opioids. However, these drugs do more harm than good in the long run. On the contrary, meditation is about rewiring the brain. It has widespread health benefits. It's about being close to nature, trusting yourself, and your ability to overcome pain.

It helps overcome stress, anxiety, and depression. Unlike opioids, it creates positive people who can help themselves and others. One may also include natural extracts and supplements in a daily regime. This may have an added benefit.

To get the maximum benefit from meditation, one needs to make it a way of life. Thus, it is also about being kind, going green, and preferring natural products. It means maintaining a positive mindset throughout the day.

Please complete the Knowledge Test – Meditation and Pain Management - Section 3 Quiz 3 - before moving to the next training file

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