

10 Surprising Things You Can Do To Decrease Pain

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by **Bonnie Boots**



On a balmy Sunday in 1989, my husband and I packed up a thermos of coffee and headed out to spend the morning on one of Florida's most beautiful beaches. We were halfway there when a driver traveling in the opposite direction on the highway attempted to make a U-turn by jumping the median strip—directly in front of us.

The accident ruptured several disks in my lower back, damaged my knees, sprained my fingers, stretched and bruised soft tissue and caused a blood clot on my brain.

When I left the house that morning, I was a happy, healthy, intelligent business owner. When I returned, I was a chronic pain patient so pumped full of medications that my daily activity existed almost entirely of drooling in my lap while a home shopping channel flickered on TV.

I'd still be sitting there today if I had not aggressively pursued alternative ways of addressing pain. I tried virtually anything that promised relief and was frequently surprised at where I found it. Today, I'm back to work full time as a reporter and digital content producer. This report offers just a brief description of some things that made a big difference in my return to happy, healthy living.

Please keep in mind that the experience of pain, and the relief of that pain, is a very personal experience. Something may help 60% of people and be completely ineffective for the other 40%. That doesn't mean the method is either a fake or a failure. It doesn't mean the people it doesn't work for aren't really experiencing pain. It only means that method works for some types of pain in some people for reasons that are not yet understood.

Self-Hypnosis

A year and a half after I was injured, I half-heartedly tried to learn self-hypnosis from a book. The results for me were dramatic. Within one week, my sensation of pain was reduced by 50%. As my pain decreased, other pain management strategies became more effective.

Self-hypnosis was the first “alternative” pain relief strategy that had a significant effect on my recovery. Here’s why it works: chronic pain, which I define as any pain lasting longer than 3 months, sets up a sort of “pain memory” that is always on. When the brain experiences any sensation over and over for months, it stops checking for that sensation every few seconds. Instead, it just assumes the sensation is there and delivers the memory of that pain as if it were the actual experience. This doesn’t mean the pain isn’t “real” or that it’s “all in your head.” It does mean that interrupting this automatic response can modify your experience of pain.

My first attempts at self-hypnosis reduced the crippling pain in my knees by 50% and allowed me, for the first time, to begin exercising. This immediately accelerated my recovery. I found that self-hypnosis was easy to learn and effective even when I didn’t really know what I was doing.

Make A List Of What Doesn't Hurt

Becoming a pain patient means you become a chronicler of your own pain. Every visit to a new doctor or specialist means filling out charts and “on a scale of one to ten” reports that detail every twitch and twinge. That means all our attention becomes focused on our pain. After a while, it seems that pain is the only experience you’re aware of, and that state of mind leads to feelings of hopelessness and depression. Those are both states of mind that lead to an increased perception of pain. You can break that vicious cycle by being just as attentive to the parts of your body that *don’t* hurt. Take a daily inventory of yourself, actually writing out details like “My left hand doesn’t hurt.” Some mornings that was all I could come up with. But by persevering, I began to expand my perception of my body to areas that weren’t in pain. Becoming aware of the fact that it wasn’t all bad improved my mood and increased my motivation to get better.

Eat Hot Peppers

Clinical studies have shown that capsaicin, a compound found in all hot peppers, has pain-reducing properties. It's particularly effective as an anti-inflammatory which makes it helpful for headache, sinus pain, arthritis and other conditions where pain is caused by swelling. You don't have to "feel the burn" to enjoy the benefits of capsaicin. Capsules of the hot pepper compound are sold in almost any health food store. They can be swallowed with water to deliver pain-relief without tasting the pepper. On the other hand, a few drops of hot pepper sauce can perk up the flavor of soups and stews while delivering their pain-relieving properties. Once I learned about capsaicin's effect on pain, I began to explore the wide variety of hot pepper sauces. I found that having a wide variety of pleasantly spicy and even fruity hot sauces on hand improved both my cooking and my health.

Exercise--any way you can

You've heard it before. Exercise is an important part of a healthy life. But here's something you many not have heard. Recent studies show that even the smallest amount of exercise brings benefits. And those benefits increase rapidly when the exercise is repeated several times throughout the day.

When every little movement causes pain, it's natural to want to curl up into the fetal position and move as little as possible. And when I was being told I had to exercise vigorously for a minimum of thirty minutes a day, I had no motivation to even begin.

These new studies show that even 3 to 5 minutes of gentle exercise can bring rapid improvement. It also shows that those 3 to 5 minutes, repeated several times throughout the day, are as beneficial as thirty minutes of exercise performed all at once.

When you're immobilized by pain, remind yourself that even a tiny amount of exercise delivers immediate benefits by loosening up tight muscles, releasing endorphins and keeping the lymph system moving. Look on the internet for examples of simple, gentle Yoga, Isometrics and Sit and Be Fit exercises that suit your personal circumstances. Remember that anything, even 2 minutes of exercise a day, is a step in the right direction.

Electric Acupuncture

I'd never heard of electric acupuncture and would never have tried it if a chiropractor hadn't introduced me to it. I found it so helpful I bought my own electric acupuncture tool. It's simple to use. It comes with a chart illustrating the body's acupuncture points. You run the tip of the pen-shaped tool along the acupuncture points in your body. When the pen senses a blockage in the path of these points, it emits a beep. You pause the pen on the point for several seconds, delivering a mild electrical stimulation to the area. When I first obtained one of these pens, I spent 20 minutes every morning looking for "beeping points." They seemed to be everywhere. At the end of a month, the pen seldom beeped and I was feeling much, much better. Electric acupuncture tools come in many price ranges, up to \$700 for professional models. I paid \$49 for the E-Acu-Pen and have used it for several years.

Melatonin

Melatonin is one of those iffy things that some people swear by and some people swear at. Some people find it gives immediate pain relief. Others find it causes diarrhea. Studies have shown that melatonin, with its sedative and analgesic effects, has significant positive impact on inflammation. Patients with fibromyalgia, for instance, given 3 milligrams of melatonin at bedtime, reported significantly less pain. Melatonin is frequently cited as effective for gout, arthritis and other conditions involving inflammation.

Melatonin is available in capsules at any health food store. It's also a natural ingredient of cherry juice. Because I'd read about the negative side effects of high doses of melatonin, I chose to use a natural form--tart cherry juice. This is available at many natural food stores as both juice and juice concentrate. I found I had to drink a glass a day for at least 4 weeks before I began to feel only marginally better.

On the other hand, I have an 82-year old friend who experienced severe leg pain caused by diabetes. The pain was so severe she was unable to sleep at night, and this was affecting her overall health. Prescription medications had failed to help her in any way. She began taking 5 milligrams of melatonin in capsule form every evening. Within 2 weeks, the leg pains disappeared completely. She experienced no negative side effects of any kind.

These anecdotal reports speak to the wide variety of effects different people can experience from any type of pain treatment. When it comes to pain relief, one size does not fit all. We are all unique, and so our experience with any kind of treatment is sure to be unique.

Be watchful when experimenting with melatonin, or, indeed, anything you put in your body in pursuit of pain relief. Stop immediately if you notice any unpleasant side effects. In the case of melatonin, potential side effects include morning grogginess or gastrointestinal symptoms such as diarrhea, so always take it before bedtime and do not experiment with high doses without medical supervision. Melatonin is a hormone. Hormones are incredibly powerful substances that should be used with caution. You should not under any circumstances experiment with melatonin if you suffer from depression.

Magnets

There are fads in medical and health care just as there are in clothing. A few years ago magnets were all the rage and people were claiming all sorts of miraculous benefits to using them. I bought a high-priced set of ceramic magnets, used them for weeks and noticed no effect whatsoever.

A couple of years later, when magnets were no longer a hot fad, I rediscovered them in my closet, brushed off the dust and tried them again. This time I noticed an effect and began using them daily. The more I used them, the more I noticed that effect.

I believe the difference in my experience was one of perception. The first time I tried the magnets, I was taking prescription pain medication. This medication severely altered my sensitivity and made it impossible for me to feel anything so subtle as the effects of the magnets. I found this to be true of several alternative therapies I tried, including homeopathic remedies. While the prescription medications were a part of my daily life, I was simply unable to perceive subtle energies and emotions.

EFT

EFT is one of those strange things that couldn't work, shouldn't work, but for some reason does. I heard about EFT, which stands for Emotional Freedom Technique, years before I was desperate enough to try it. EFT involves using your fingers to tap on acupuncture meridian points on your body while talking to yourself about your symptoms. The whole idea of talking to my body while tapping my fingers on my face seemed too kooky. But when I eventually tried it, I found it immediately effective. It's now as much a part of my life as brushing my teeth.

Free workbooks teaching the simple steps to performing EFT are widely available on the web. Just Google "free EFT manual."

I especially recommend anything by Gary Craig, particularly his video CDs. Although EFT can be quickly and easily learned from the free manual, actually seeing Gary Craig using EFT with clients is an excellent way of overcoming the skepticism you may naturally feel on first hearing of this unusual therapy. Even after I had read several books and effectively used EFT on myself, I still had trouble believing it. The video learning series showed me case after case of people experiencing the same effects I had, which helped me fully embrace the therapy and sharpen my skills in using it.

Talk Nice To Yourself

One of the most important things I had to learn during my recovery was how to talk nice to myself. Negative thinking was draining my energy and keeping me a victim. A constant stream of angry, negative thoughts—about the moron that caused the accident, incompetent health care workers, evil insurance companies, and about my own weaknesses and failures—were poisoning my life. Negative self-talk has the ability to both weaken the immune system and increase the perception of pain. I read many books about how to change my internal dialogue, most notable Shad Helmstetter's "What To Say When You Talk To Yourself" and made a workbook for myself that helped me reframe my negative thinking into a more positive, pro-active state of mind. It made all the difference in the world.

Embrace The Imperfect Life

Television, movies, magazines and newspapers all bombard us with messages—most noticeably advertising messages—that we should be perfect and that, furthermore, we *CAN* be perfect if we just drive the right car, wear the right clothes, embrace the right religion and inject the right amount of botox into our faces.

This constant repetition of the message that we can be made perfect by consuming this, that and the other is harmful under the best circumstances. Under the worst circumstances, such as living with chronic pain, it can be devastating. When I was at my worst, friends and family were constantly asking me if I'd tried this or that highly advertised prescription or over-the-counter pain medication. Had I tried this or that fad therapy? Had I tried handing my pain over to Jesus? Implied in all these questions was the assumption that I was doing something wrong. I was a failure. I was missing the beat in some way because clearly, it seemed to them, all I had to do was fix myself with any one of these widely touted cure-alls.

Here's what I know: I know that pain is a part of life. I know that the idea that we can fix everything in our lives is an illusion, one capable of driving us crazy. Many things are simply out of our control. People who blame us for not being able to fix our back pain or arthritis or cancer or fibromyalgia are simply ignorant. You have my permission to ignore them, even when they try to convince you they mean well.

When I say, "Embrace the imperfect life," I'm not suggesting that you passively accept whatever state you're in. Far from it. There's not a doubt in my mind that I'd still be crippled by pain today if I had not found the strength to aggressively and persistently pursue all available therapies.

What I am saying is this: Your life probably doesn't seem perfect right now. Embrace it anyway. Celebrate it anyway, even the parts that are painful. Accepting yourself as you are here and now stops the cycle of self-blame. It saves you from wasting your energy on guilt and judgment and lets you put it to work on healing.

Embrace your imperfect life and one day you'll wake up to discover that your life, in its own unique and complex way, really is perfect after all.

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