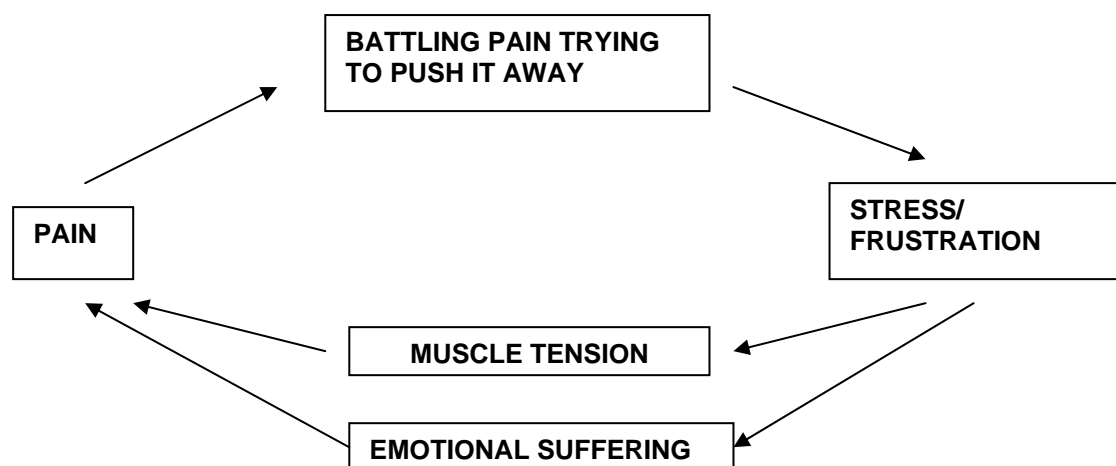


## **MANAGING PAIN THROUGH MINDFULNESS MEDITATION**

When we have pain it tends to grab hold of our attention, it says ‘focus on me!!’ It tends to crowd out other thoughts, feelings and sensations. While this can serve a useful function for new, acute pain episodes, it is not very helpful for persistent pain.

Many people try to cope with pain by trying to distract their attention away from it. While diverting your attention away from pain is sometimes a useful thing to do, there are times when this is very difficult. There may be times when the pain seems so intense and so overwhelming that it feels almost impossible to think about anything else but the pain. Understandably, the mind normally tends to see pain as something that is undesirable and therefore something to be pushed away. However, constantly trying to push the pain away can become an exhausting and relentless battle. This battle can itself lead to increased stress and frustration and serves to increase muscle tension and to feed into the stress-pain cycle, only making things worse.



Mindfulness offers a way to stop fighting and struggling against the pain, because you realise that all this battling only makes your suffering that much worse.

### **Mindful awareness...**

To begin with the idea of using meditation to help manage pain might seem strange or unlikely to be helpful. To some people the idea of meditation conjures up ideas of 'tuning out' or getting into some weird mind state to 'escape' reality. Mindfulness meditation is not like this at all, instead it is actually a way of being more in contact with your present experience. So then, you might think, how can being more aware of my experience help me manage pain? Surely this will make things worse for me?

In meditation we do become more aware of ourselves, but what is most important is that we become aware of and change the relationship we have with our pain. It is this change in relationship that makes meditation a useful tool in pain management. Mindfulness is much more than simply being aware. We can be aware of pain without being mindful at all. Mindfulness is a particular kind of awareness which is purposeful, focused, curious, non-judgemental and rooted in our moment-by-moment experience.

### **Becoming curious about your pain...**

With Mindfulness we purposefully observe our experience as it takes place, including any pain that may be present. The mind naturally tends to see pain as a "thing," and to give it a degree of solidity and consistency that it does not in fact have. In mindfulness meditation we train ourselves to see the many different sensations that we collectively label as "pain." We may even gently make mental notes of the sensations that we notice. For example we may note the presence of "tingling," "pulsing," "throbbing," "heat," "cold," "aching," "tightness," etc. When we let go of the rather crude label "pain" in this way and instead note what is **actually** present **in the moment** we can find that each individual sensation is easier to bear. Sometimes we might notice that there is no pain present, or that the sensations that we're experiencing are

neutral. Seeing the sensations with a new curiosity allows us to let go of some of the battling and struggling and just **to be** with pain.

### **There's more to experience than just pain...**

When pain and pain-related thoughts dominate, you will find it much more difficult to enjoy life. However, as you practice mindful awareness of the present moment, you can learn to notice and better appreciate your immediate surroundings. You begin to get more appreciation of the simple things that are present here and now. In Mindfulness meditation we observe more than just the pain that may happen to be present. We become aware of the whole physical body, emotions, and thoughts and of how each of these interacts with the others. One thing we can then begin to see is that although pain is present in our experience, it isn't the whole of our experience.

Mindfulness gives us a sense of the physical and mental "landscape" within which our pain is experienced. This then helps to give a sense of perspective to the experience of pain and place it where it should be i.e. a single part of our experience instead of dominating the whole of it.

At times of stress, it may seem as if pain is the only thing that we experience, but this comes about because we have a kind of personal "zoom lens" that is closely focused on the pain. Change that zoom lens for a wide-angle lens and the pain seems much smaller and therefore more manageable. When done mindfully, activities like taking your dog for a walk, listening to music, washing dishes, working in your garden, interacting with your grandchildren, or simply looking at the pale blue sky can take on a much richer, fuller, and more enjoyable experience.

### **Thoughts are just thoughts...**

Experiencing pain can often trigger unhelpful and negative thoughts.... "This is never going to end," "This is just going to get worse," "I can't bear this," or "I must be a bad person to deserve all this pain." In turn, these thoughts lead to anxiety, depression or anger, because we tend to believe the stories we think when we are unmindful, and this further adds to our suffering. The practice of

Mindfulness includes becoming aware of our thoughts and seeing that our thoughts are indeed **just thoughts** and are **not facts**. This can be quite a liberating discovery. When we learn to see thoughts as just another experience coming and going against the background of our overall physical and mental experience, we free ourselves from the kind of runaway thinking that is a common part of distress. We can see thoughts like "I can't stand this" coming into being and realize that they are thoughts rather than facts. Then instead of taking on these thoughts as fact, we simply note them and let them go.

***Mindfulness is about stopping and being present,  
that is all.***

***Jon Kabat Zinn***

#### **For more information on mindfulness**

- Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn (1991) "Full Catastrophe Living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness." Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group (good book)
- Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2004) Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation for everyday life.
- Breathworks, 16-20 Turner Street, Manchester, M4 1DZ Tel. 0161 8341110
- Also, CD REFERENCES FROM Beckys updated version

[www.breathworks-mindfulness.co.uk](http://www.breathworks-mindfulness.co.uk)

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