

MEDITATION AND PAIN



If you suffer any chronic pain, it is likely that somewhere along the line someone suggested you try meditation. Perhaps they oversold it (“it will cure everything!!”) or used a softer approach – either way, you may have been left with some questions like “Does this really work?” or “Isn’t this for aging hippies and new-age weirdos?”

Well, yes, but it’s been around for a long time, so others have also found it useful - other people besides monks or bald tambourine-playing Krishna worshipers you may have seen at an airport. Or Santa Monica. The scientific literature has been gaining some steam for the past few decades about the benefits of meditation, for no small reason because of the efforts of Jon Kabat Zinn. A former MIT molecular biologist, Jon Kabat Zinn created

mindfulness based stress reduction and went on to form the Stress Reduction Clinic at the UMass Medical School, which is still functioning today as the Centre for Mindfulness, still at UMass Medical School. Essentially, what he did was to take Buddhist meditation techniques, stripped them of all mysticism and begin employing it as a tool to reduce stress in, well, anyone who was interested.

So, great, but what does this have to do with pain management? It seems the short answer is that it helps reduce pain, but there are some caveats. First, though, the data: Several systematic reviews (the most reliable kind of report) show evidence that mindfulness meditation helps sufferers deal with the psychological aspects of their chronic pain and that

it has some effect in reducing the physical sensation of pain. Additionally, Yoga (a mindful physical practice) seems effective at reducing chronic pain. Essentially, this data shows that if you have chronic pain and a meditative practice (and perhaps a mindful physical practice like yoga, tai chi, etc.), you will likely experience a reduction in the stress and depression associated with the pain and you will have a reduction in the pain itself. This is not unlike medical marijuana which does have some benefit in pain reduction, but also has the complimentary benefit in making you not care so much about the pain. And like medical marijuana, more research is needed with meditation and chronic pain.

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It should be underscored that meditation is not a panacea, no matter what some advocates say. If you require pain medication, you will likely still require pain medication, perhaps less. If you require therapy, antidepressants and other treatments, don't expect meditation to obviate the use of these other treatments – meditation should be viewed as part of your pain management protocol, an adjunct to treatments that have provided benefit.

If you are interested in meditation, please ask us about resources that are available.

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