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Pain – The Tools!

Combining knitting and stitching with recent research findings gives you a powerful tool in your pain management armoury...

The subject of chronic pain is a complex one. Part one touched briefly on some of the issues which can affect the amount of pain you experience. Some of these are physical, some mental, some external. Some of these issues you will have no control over, but others you will be able to control to lessen the impact which pain has on your life. But it helps to know how...

In Part two, we're going to take a closer look at some of the theories we've developed over the last four years. We'll look at how these fit in with recent research and how you can actively use your knitting and stitching as tools to help you to learn how to manage chronic pain more effectively.

For those of you lucky enough to be pain free, the information in this article could be adapted to manage many other conditions, including depression. For the fit and healthy they can help you to find balance in what can sometimes be a stressful world. Having a

sense of wellness and living life positively is important for us all.

When I first stumbled across a large number of letters extolling the benefits of cross stitching my first thoughts were that perhaps the concentration needed to follow a chart provided enough distraction to enable people to 'forget' their pain. Narratives told of even those with severe pain finding relief. I began to look into the process of distraction in more detail and became completely fascinated by the brain's involvement in the experience of chronic pain.

Distraction debate

Psychologists and other health professionals appear to be divided about distraction. One researcher told us **"It's the most powerful analgesic we know of"**. Others feel that it is of limited use for long-term pain. They argue that you can't distract yourself all the time, so in cases of continuous pain it's of little

use. There are others who argue that distracting yourself can lead to more pain. If, for example, you have back pain where your pain increases after 10

"Narratives tell of even those with severe pain finding relief in knitting and stitching. Those attending our group report no increased pain as a result of even prolonged sitting."

minutes sitting, sitting for longer will increase your pain. If distraction enables you to sit longer without feeling pain you could suffer a kick back of increased pain and stiffness when you eventually get up to move. However this doesn't appear to be happening to the patients who attend our knitting and stitching group at a Pain Management Unit. They are able to sit for considerably

longer than their personal limits and DON'T have increased pain following this prolonged sitting which can be up to three hours. We do

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however advocate that everyone gets up to stretch at regular intervals to boost circulation even if you're fit and healthy (see *Stitchlinks Guide to Good Posture*).

It's my belief that if used correctly, distraction can be a powerful tool in managing persistent pain because it gives YOU back control.

First hand experience

Let's take the first statement – **“It's the most powerful analgesic we know of”**. I can personally testify to that. When I was seven months pregnant with my daughter I broke a lower rib. The pain was severe and the doctors advised against taking powerful pain relief because of the baby, so I had no real option but to manage without.

A couple of weeks later I coughed and it broke again, so I knew there was a very real chance of it not being strong enough to withstand

actual labour. I was given the option of having an injection into the fracture site during labour, but that would only be possible if I didn't have any gas and air. I knew when I went into labour that I couldn't have any pain relief, so over the weeks I developed a technique for 'tuning out' my pain. I learnt to concentrate on my breathing, and I had it down to a fine art. When I went into labour I used a technique where I took myself (the being that was ME) into my head and imagined myself sitting there in cushioned comfort, focusing on a bright light on the inside of my skull. I wasn't in my body any more I was safe in my head. The pain of labour was happening to my body and although I was aware of it, it didn't really affect me. I'd successfully managed to 'tune out' the pain, so I've known for a long time that it can be done. What I didn't know at the time, was that this was distraction at its most powerful, perhaps with a smattering of Mindfulness thrown in!

MRI scans show that not only does distraction quite literally take your mind off pain, but it can also stimulate the release of the brain's natural pain killers. Knitting and stitching are highly effective tools of distraction – large numbers of you have told us this. You've also told us that it's effective for chronic pain. This is the gist

of what you've said...

When pain becomes chronic it is relentless, you often feel your life is controlled by pain, by doctors, appointments, drugs and their side effects. Having a tool with no side effects which enables you to 'switch off' your pain even for a short period of time, gives you back control over that pain. Feeling in control can have a significant positive effect on your outlook on life.

In real life

To practise managed distraction within your pacing regime, make sure you get up, stretch gently and move around shortly before your personal pacing limit. If necessary use a timer to remind you to do this – choose one with a discreet bleep so that you're not jolted too harshly back from

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the meditative-like state which knitting and stitching can induce. You also need to ensure your posture is correct (see our *Stitchlinks Guide to Posture*) when

stitching. Distraction can become a powerful tool in your pain management armoury, and I think you can use it in everyday life, too. This is an example of how...

Many years ago I had a nasty, high speed skiing accident where I injured my neck badly. Although it was a long time ago, it still returns to haunt me occasionally. When I became interested in the process of distraction I experimented with developing a technique to enable me to use it in everyday life. And it works for me, so hopefully it will for you too.

I started by walking around our local park deliberately using my other

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senses as a distraction from the pain in my neck. I did this by making myself consciously think about the colours around me, the feeling of the ground under my feet, the sensation of the air on my skin, smells, different bird songs and other noises. The things we quite often block out. As these signals were constantly changing as I

walked I had to concentrate hard on what they felt like and, miraculously, I found I'd 'forgotten' my pain. It was still there but as I was focusing on lots of other sensations and making myself aware of all the other signals entering my brain, it seemed to put the pain further down the priority list.

Our brains are bombarded with information from all our senses all of the time, but we get used to these and can go through life side-lining them. Danger signals enter the brain a bit like sirens or alarms demanding immediate attention, but you can learn to tune them down and turn up your other senses. It takes a bit of practise, but for lots of reasons the world will seem a much better place if you can.

Learn it while stitching!

You can use this technique wherever you are and, as with methods we'll touch on later, you can learn it through your knitting and stitching. Next time you sit down to knit or stitch practise tuning in to the sensation of the yarn running through your hands, experiment with different yarn thicknesses and textures from soft bamboo tape to thick chunky wool and thin fluffy mohair. Experiment with wooden, metal and plastic needles and enjoy the different texture, temperature and flexibility of each material. Allow your brain to soak in

the beautiful colours and listen to the noises going on around you. Try to focus in on all these at the same

“Next time you sit down to knit or stitch practise tuning in to the sensations you're experiencing. Allow your brain to soak in the colours, textures and sounds, to enable these sensory signals to push pain down the priority list.”

time, to enable these sensory signals to push your pain down the priority list. Do this every time you knit or stitch so it becomes a habit. Make a conscious effort to remember what it feels like so that you're learning from the process and can switch it on or off at will.

You can enhance this experience by focusing in on the click of your needles or adding a sound of your choice. Plug yourself into some headphones and listen to your favourite music, podcasts, talking books or anything else that takes your fancy. Make a point of using this as a learning experience, so that you can apply the techniques you've learnt when you're away from your knitting and stitching.

This technique has similarities to Mindfulness. Some Pain Management Units use Mindfulness as a

tool to manage persistent pain. Mindful Meditation has long been practised by Buddhists and involves entering a state of mind where you are aware of every sensation and experience within the present moment. And, at the same time, being aware of your relationship to others and your surroundings within that moment. That means being aware of unpleasant as well as pleasant sensations, but finding a central place between the two where you find your own sanctuary. Think of it like being on the

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stable central fulcrum of a see-saw where you are aware of pain and other problems on one side and more pleasant experiences on the other. I recently had the good fortune to meet Vidyamala Burgh of Breathworks (www.breathworks-mindfulness.co.uk). They help people with long-term pain, illness and stress to manage their condition through meditation, body awareness and creative approaches to living.

It's thought, by those who teach Mindfulness to

manage long-term pain, that this approach brings an acceptance of pain within your life enabling you to live alongside it rather than battling against it. It can also help to halt the escalation of negative thoughts.

Acceptance of pain is a hugely important aspect of managing it. It's the first big step. You need to accept pain as part of your life rather than the enemy you need to run from, before you can manage it effectively. I don't personally think pain should become who YOU as a person are, but it should be an accepted part of your life. It's my opinion that the two are different.

If you are constantly battling to find a 'cure' it will drain your energy and you will have great difficulty managing your pain. Mindfulness can help you with this process but even if you haven't got pain it can help us all deal with the normal ups and downs that occur in all our lives. It's important to learn to accept life's difficulties and trials too, particularly those you have no control over.

Don't react, respond

We've said many times at Stitchlinks that you can't control what life has to throw at you – good or bad – but you can control how you react to those situations. And you have the power to change those reactions (see the article '**Changing your**

Mind' on our Health Matters page of the Stitchlinks website). Through building up an awareness of yourself and your relationships with others, Mindfulness can teach you how to respond to

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circumstances instead of reacting. Learning to respond and not react can help to prevent or lessen the cycles that often go hand in hand with pain to make it worse. Pain can lead to fear, stress, anxiety, depression, tension and other emotions which can all cause more pain, setting up vicious cycles. Learning to recognise these and taking action to stop them can dramatically improve your quality of life.

More in Part three

In Part three we'll take a further look at Mindfulness. We'll find out more about Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy and how you can use your knitting and stitching to help with relaxation and pacing. Whether you have pain or not, they are techniques that can help us all to live a more fulfilled life!