

Pain – tools for the mind!

Changing your mind can change your pain. We take a look at how your knitting and stitching are the ideal portable tools...

Part two of this series on pain began to explore how you can use your knitting and stitching to learn and apply various techniques taught by experts in pain management. In Part three we're going to expand on these issues and move on to explore others.

We'll begin by taking a closer look at Mindfulness and how you can use your knitting and stitching as tools to facilitate entering this state of mind.

There are many types of meditation, but to practise Mindfulness you need to stay grounded in the present moment. As you knit or stitch focus in on your sensations good and bad and accept them as part of your life in that moment. Experience the present moment without criticism or judgement.

It's useful to carry out a tour of your body, starting at your feet and working your way up. Concentrate on your breathing and the click of the needles. Experience the sensations coming from your

skin, the smells and sounds surrounding you, the texture and colour of the yarn running through your fingers. Imagine yourself sitting on that stable see-saw fulcrum that we talked about in Part two, so your pain becomes a part of your awareness, but just one of the many millions of signals entering your brain. Don't allow your pain to dominate. Feel yourself very alive and aware in the present moment.

Sort your thoughts

You can use this state of mind to examine your thoughts because it enables you to look at them without becoming stressed, without judging them. It enables troubling thoughts to come and go without causing you stress or feeling you are battling with, or in conflict with them.

This will enable you to look at issues from different perspectives. It's a great way of solving specific problems and sorting your thoughts. Those who suffer from low

mood and depression often find it difficult looking at issues from various view points so this is a useful exercise to practise if you suffer from depression, or as

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a way of managing stress, too. This is what some of you have said, *“While I was knitting and putting stitches in order it was easier to put my own mind in order”*, *“Cross stitch has helped to keep my hands active and pain free. It helps to calm you by giving you something to focus on whilst your mind unravels your problems. The sense of accomplishment is life*

affirming. It strengthens your feelings of self worth and you feel very much part of a community”.

Personally, I find knitting enables me to sort out my thoughts at the end of a day.

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The best way I can describe it is that my thoughts enter on one side of my head and seem to bob along in a 3D space and then out the other side. The 3D space enables me to look at those thoughts from all angles and often I can come up with solutions to problems I’ve been battling with all day. It also slows down those thoughts and unravels them from those cycles that tend to go around and around in your head. They’re not stressful cycles any more, but slow moving issues bobbing along that I can deal with. Knitting last thing at night ensures you sort out your thoughts before you hit the pillow!

One lady told us, ***“My knitting helped me while away the down time between therapy sessions and think through some issues without having to give my whole mind to***

them – this may sound contrary, but these things were issues I felt uncomfortable thinking about and would usually avoid. However, with knitting taking up part of my headspace it felt safe to give the rest over to the actual problem.”

Mindfulness based CBT

In the UK, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) has endorsed Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) as an effective treatment for preventing relapse into depression in those who have had three or more episodes. It has also been found to be effective in conditions such as long-term pain, stress, depression, anxiety, fibromyalgia and psoriasis.

MBCT is based on Mindfulness, but differs in that it also includes structured exercises taken from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). You’re also given a basic knowledge of the medical condition being treated. This type of treatment fits in well with a pain management course. CBT exercises help to break the link between negative mood and negative thinking. Combined with Mindfulness, which helps you to recognise when mood is beginning to go down, Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy can help to stop a downward spiralling of negative thoughts and rumination. It helps you

develop a state of mind where you’re not dwelling on the past or worrying about the future but experiencing and enjoying the present moment to the full.

A study in Cambridge, UK found that MBCT reduced the rate of relapse into depression from 78% to 36% in those with more than three previous episodes. Now these benefits are being explored in the management of chronic pain and are becoming part of pain management courses.

Mindfulness has other benefits too. Research by Professor Richard Davidson of Wisconsin University suggests that just eight weeks of daily meditation may change brain and immune function in positive ways, so there are many potential benefits.

“According to Professor Richard Davidson of Wisconsin University, just eight weeks of practising Mindfulness on a daily basis can change the brain and immune system in positive ways.”

There are other types of meditation, however. Many of you describe being able to ‘lose yourselves’, ‘escape into a sanctuary’, ‘take yourself off into another world’, ‘zone out’, ‘tune out’.

I think this is another important aspect of knitting and stitching. You can choose whether you stay grounded and fully aware of the present moment, or you can choose to get completely away from everything – to escape into another world. In my view both are important.

Daydreaming

Allowing your mind to roam freely can give it a rest from the problems which might be occupying it night and day. And, with regards to pain, not only does it give you a break from your pain, but it gives you a break from constantly having to manage it. It's a bit like taking a mini-break from life enabling you

“Allowing your mind the freedom to roam can give it a rest from the problems that might be occupying it night and day. It's a bit like taking a mini-break from life enabling you to relax.”

to relax. Many of you have echoed the following comments, ***“Without my stitching, I may have lost my mind. It has always been there for me to take my mind away from this world”***, ***“Keeping your fingers busy somehow seems to free up the mind to wander, imagine, dream and fantasise”***.

This brings me to another important aspect of managing pain – the ability to relax. Pain brings with it tension, fear, stress and poor posture which make it difficult for muscles to relax. This tension hampers circulation; the transportation of nutrients to various parts of the body and the movement of toxins and waste materials out of the body. This can make you feel generally unwell and tired. Muscles and ligaments can become shortened and nerves irritated. Fear over the cause of your pain and anxiety about how it might affect your life, work, family and relationships also raises stress levels and tension. All this increases pain, which in turn increases stress, fear and tension. It all then becomes a vicious cycle, difficult to break.

Relaxation

Those of you who suffer from chronic pain will know how difficult it is to relax when you're in pain. Similarly those who suffer from depression or stress will find the same. Staff in Pain Management units tell me that, not surprisingly, it's very difficult to teach those in pain how to relax. To add to the problem, if you've been in a state of tension for some time, you may not even be aware that you need to relax – your brain might feel the tension is a 'normal' sensation, so may have to

relearn what it actually feels like to be relaxed!

If your body exists in a certain state for long

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enough, it learns to accept this as the 'normal' state of being. So if you're tense all the time it's very easy to forget what it feels like to be relaxed. And this applies to those of us who are fit and healthy as well as those who are ill. Poor posture, stressful jobs, anxiety and pain can all result in tense muscles, which can, with time, become to feel 'normal'. You may not even realise that you are tense until you experience what it feels like to be truly relaxed.

Given that so many of us find it difficult to relax we think it's a great idea to get involved in an activity that enables you to relax as a side effect you don't really have to think about! Many people describe a feeling of instantaneous calm washing over them when they knit and stitch. Providing you choose a project within your abilities, knitting and stitching can help you to

experience the ‘feeling’ of relaxation and this will enable you to ‘remember’ and ‘find’ this state again in other situations. So you’re transferring the skills you’ve learnt whilst knitting and stitching to other areas of your life.

Since starting to knit regularly again, I’ve found I can ‘remember’ the feeling of relaxation and apply it when I find myself in stressful situations. I tell myself to ‘tune in to the feeling’ and then I can recall what I felt like when I’m knitting. It slows down my breathing and heart rate and I can feel it easing any tension. The calming effect of knitting and stitching helps people to deal with the ‘why me’ anger that often accompanies long-term illness, too.

We know that many of you already use your knitting and stitching to successfully

manage anxiety, even panic attacks and phobias. Knitting and stitching’s portability enables you to carry projects around to manage such conditions on the move,

“Knitting and stitching’s portability enables you to carry around projects to manage problems such as pain spasms or anxiety when out and about.”

including any anxiety you may have at managing pain spasms when you’re out and about or in social situations.

However, if you find yourself in a situation where you don’t have your stitching available, or it would be inappropriate to take it out, you can, with a bit of practise, recall that feeling of relaxation and peace of mind

and apply it to any stressful event. Learning to relax is important in the management of chronic pain as it will enable you to break those vicious pain–tension–more pain cycles. So next time you’re knitting or stitching try to focus in on the feeling of relaxation and then practise transferring that across to everyday life. Learn how to switch it on when you need it. Remember that this will be like learning any skill, so expect it to take a little time to perfect.

Coming up

In Part four I take a look at how knitting and stitching can help to take the frustration out of pacing. We’ll also talk about some of the other intriguing issues that combine to make knitting and stitching effective therapies for the management of long-term pain.

Tips for using knitting and stitching to manage pain...

- **Re-read Part One** – where we take a closer look at the mechanisms of chronic pain. Knowing your pain makes it easier to manage.
- **Practise good posture** – It’s important to sit properly whilst you stitch or knit. See our *Stitchlinks Guide to Good Posture*. available free on Stitchlinks.com.
- **Use distraction properly** – distraction is a powerful tool in the management of chronic pain if used properly. Use it as part of your pacing regime if necessary.
- **Practise distraction** – as you knit and stitch, focus in on the colours, feel the textures, breathe in the different smells on the air and tune in to the sounds. Learn to raise the profile of other sensations to push pain into the background.

- **Transfer your skills** – practise the above exercise whilst not knitting or stitching. Go for a walk and practise turning down your pain signals and turning up signals from your other senses.
- **Plug yourself in** – use headphones to listen to books, music, relaxation tapes, podcasts or even coursework tapes to distract and relax.
- **Imagine yourself** – on a wide steady fulcrum of a see-saw. Your pain and problems are on one side and pleasant experiences on the other. You are aware of them all, but walking the stable path down the middle.
- **Accept pain as part of your life** – don't let pain become who YOU are, but do accept it as a part of your life, so that you learn to live alongside it. Accepting pain is the first big step to managing it.
- **Stop battling with 'the enemy'** – don't view pain as your enemy, something you have to do battle with as this will make you tense and encourage negative thought cycles. This is part of acceptance.
- **Learn to accept** – when in pain other difficulties and problems can push us over our limit of endurance. Learn to accept that normal life is full of ups and downs. They happen and always will to us all and haven't deliberately selected you!
- **Develop an attitude** – where you accept the 'bigger plan'. It's a good way of dealing with setbacks. When failures or problems happen tell yourself that this will make space for something better to come along.
- **Learn to respond** – it's a much better way of dealing with problems than reacting to them. Dealing with flare ups is a good example. Plan your response in advance and put this into action when they hit!
- **Become acquainted** – with your personal triggers. Mindfulness will enable you to become more aware of your moods and feelings. Learn to recognise the early warning signs of downward negative cycles.
- **Carry a kit** – get into the habit of always carrying a small kit around to deal with pain or problems when on the move.
- **Adapt and evolve** – change happens all the time. Learn to adapt to the changes you need to make in your life and evolve with them. Learn new ways of doing things and don't get angry. It won't improve things.
- **Take control** – over your pain. You can't make it disappear, but you can control how you respond to it! Knitting and stitching regularly will help you regain control.
- **Take things one step at a time** – don't try to do everything at once. Make changes gradually and be patient. Take things slowly and it will come together!
- **Maintain and increase social contacts** – it's important not to allow your pain to isolate you. If you can't get out and about, ask friends in to you. Go online to meet friends from across the world in the safe environment of the Stitchlinks Forum.