
MANAGING YOUR PAIN

CALMING SKILLS 1

WHAT PROGRESS CAN YOU EXPECT?

It can be difficult to master calming skills and relaxation when you are in pain. Dr James Hawkins offers some useful advice

WHAT PROGRESS CAN YOU EXPECT?

- Learning calming skills is like learning any other skill.
- The first challenge is to practise regularly.
- Then you start noticing some early signs of improvement.
- Then your more troublesome symptoms ease as well.

SKILLS LEARNING

Learning calming skills is in many ways like learning any other skill. Being able to read these words is an example of a skill that you have already successfully learned. There are many other such examples of your successful learning: so in the past you have learned to walk and talk. You may have learned to drive, to type, to ride a bicycle, to play a musical instrument or to cook. We all have different skills that we have learned and now use quite naturally. At first, when they were new, these skills may have seemed a bit strange or difficult. Before very long however we learned to use them almost as if we had always known them. They have become second nature to us and it can be hard to remember how we ever found them new or difficult. We may even wonder how we ever got along without them. It is just the same when we learn calming skills.

Additionally learning to be calmer can be fascinating and a lot of fun.

THE FIRST CHALLENGE IS TO PRACTISE REGULARLY

When you first start learning a new skill, the initial challenge is to get competent at the skill itself. It is only once you are reasonably good at it that you can expect to be able to do something useful with it. When we have our first driving lessons, we don't drive anywhere that we really want to go to. We probably practise in some quiet side road so that we can learn to work the gears, the handbrake and so on. Only when we are reasonably competent at handling the car are we likely to drive to somewhere that we actually want to get to. It's the same with calming skills.

After the first week or so of practice, you will know you're likely to be on the right track if you are practising regularly and if you occasionally open your eyes at the end of a practice and can honestly say that it was quite enjoyable. All your symptoms may be just as troublesome, but you are learning what can be an extremely helpful skill. In a little while you can use this skill to get somewhere useful – just as with learning to drive.

THEN YOU START NOTICING SOME EARLY SIGNS OF IMPROVEMENT

After a further week or so you are likely to begin to notice some general benefits. If for example you were learning calming skills to help with migraines or with panic attacks, these symptoms might be just as bad as they always were, but you might have for example started to sleep rather better, be less snappy with family and friends or feel generally less under pressure.

Typically the symptoms that most bother us are more entrenched and take a bit longer to improve than some of the milder more general symptoms we may also be suffering from. It's as if it has been a long hard winter. Some children have made a large snowman in the corner of the garden. This snowman represents our most entrenched symptoms. As spring comes, we notice the grass beginning to show through all over the lawn before the snowman itself really begins to melt. So our most entrenched symptoms often take longer to melt away than the less severe more general symptoms we may also have.

THEN YOUR MORE TROUBLESOME SYMPTOMS EASE AS WELL

We may well need to develop and use the calming skills for a few weeks before seeing significant

improvements in our most troublesome symptoms. However we can monitor whether we are on the right track by checking that we are practising regularly and at least occasionally finding it enjoyable. We are also likely to notice general benefits before the more specific problems we are most troubled by start to resolve. You might be particularly lucky and notice important improvements in your state surprisingly quickly, but that's a bonus. The more usual pattern of progress is as I have described it. It's the same as learning any other skill. So, learning to drive initially involves simply learning to handle the vehicle. Then we can go on short journeys. Only after that do we drive to places we really want to get to.

Dr Hawkins specialises in the treatment of stress-related symptoms, working through the charity "Good Medicines". You can try practising calming skills using his CD Coping with Persistent Pain. The CD costs £13.00 from the British Holistic Medical Association (see below).

HELPFUL RESOURCES

British Holistic Medical Association, 59 Lansdowne Place, Hove, East Sussex, Tel 01273 725951. CDs and tapes for pain, stress, relaxation, sleep, meditation. Available from BHMA, PO Box 371, Bridgwater, Somerset TA6 9BG, orderline 01278 722000, www.bhma.org

Breathworks, CDs for managing pain, illness and stress with guided mindfulness meditation, *Body Scan*, *Mindfulness of Breathing*, *Kindly Awareness*. Adapts a Buddhist approach to the management of pain and stress. Breathworks, 16-20 Turner Street, Manchester M4 1DZ; Tel 0161 834 1110, www.breathworks-mindfulness.co.uk

Pain Relief Foundation, CDs/tapes based on the pain management programme used at Walton Hospital, *Coping with Pain*, *Coping with Headaches and Migraine*, *Coping with Back Pain*, *Feeling Good* (assertiveness & self esteem), available as Pain Management Packs or individually. Also *The Relaxation Kit*. Details from Talking Life, PO Box 1, Wirral, Merseyside L47 7DD, Tel 0151 632 1206 (enquiries), 0151 632 0662 (credit card sales), www.talkinglife.co.uk



CAMPAIGNING ON PAIN

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PUTTING YOU IN CONTROL

- Free Factsheet and leaflets to help you manage your pain.
- Our magazine *Pain Matters* brings you the best of self help:
 - How to cope with pain.
 - How well are our pain services working?
 - Updates on the latest developments.
 - And much more!
- Helpline: **0844 499 4676**.

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